

## BITE-SIZED EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

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### EP 2: CONTROL ISSUES

It was your typical Tuesday morning. Perhaps, a little distinctive for its calm, clear blue skies, but still...typical enough. Just 20 minutes before 9, Greer Epstein got a call from a friend, asking about a cigarette break. Though it was quite the elevator ride from the 67th floor, it was such a beautiful day, Epstein figured, why not? As she stepped outside, she was puzzled by everyone's frozen figures, gaping at sky. She followed their gaze to find plumes of smoke billowing out of the North Tower, and wondered, "How do they fix something like that?"

Then a plane flew right into her office in the South Tower.

Just like Epstein, several lives were saved from 9/11 due to mindless, seemingly pointless, decisions. Rob Herzog took the local subway instead of the express and missed it by 5 minutes. Monica O'Leary was laid off the day before. Bill Trinkle fussed with his 2-year-old for just a bit too long and missed his train. The list goes on and on.

Now, you might be thinking, "Sure, what a spectacular stroke of luck. But what about the thousands more that didn't get so lucky? What about their lives, family, and future?" And I must say, that sure is the question. These survivors, visiting memorials for people they worked next to just the day before, wrestled with these same questions.

Their family and friends held them with relief, assuring them of their blessing, all the while they wondered, "Why me?"

Yet it was as simple as one mishap, one dawdling moment. One simple decision that separated the fallen from the survivors, without either group making any conscious decision for their fate.

This presents an urgent and unsettling question: how much control do we really have over our lives?

I'm Maylee O'Brien and welcome to your Bite-Sized Existential Crisis.

The concept of control seems pretty simple. It's a well-established fact that there's a lot we can't control. And I mean a *lot*: the actions of others, natural disasters, the environment we're born into, the passage of time, our orbit around the sun, the breadth of the universe...

Despite this disturbing lack of control, humanity may still find comfort in the control we have over ourselves. Even if the world around us may spiral into chaos, we still have autonomy, right? Well...what if we don't?

Let's boil it down to the basic mechanisms of control. How do we exert control over our lives? We use our memories. The knowledge of our past experiences helps us make decisions and these decisions control the direction our lives. Sounds simple enough, right? Not so fast.

Our memory isn't quite as cut and dry/accurate as we would like it to be. We may think our memories work like pictures or film, simply recording the events of our lives. However, memories are more like clay, with each one molded to represent what happened based upon our perception of the event. But, it gets more complicated. According to growing research, anyone can just rewet your clay and make a whole new sculpture. Elizabeth Loftus calls this implanting a false memory.

Loftus is a nationally recognized psychologist with decades of research memory manipulation. Her "lost-in-the-mall" study is a classic example of implanting a false memory. In the study, 24 participants were each given four childhood events provided by their family, with one of them being false: getting lost in the mall. The subjects read and then wrote down as many details about each event that they could muster. Then, 1-2 weeks later, they were asked what they could remember. By the end, ¼ of the participants had formed false memories of getting lost in the mall.

So, what's the big deal? Perhaps this is a bit of a strange phenomenon, but not necessarily dangerous. However, the supposedly "lost kids" of Loftus' experiment are just the tip of the iceberg. In Canada, researchers successfully planted a childhood memory of an attack by a vicious animal in one half of their subjects. Even more disturbing, a study in Italy implanted a memory of witnessing a demonic possession. This implies a potentially limitless power for anyone to implant anything.

Unfortunately, some have already taken advantage of this power. The aforementioned studies implant false memories temporarily, gathering the data they need without producing a long-term impact. However, in the 1990s, a strange phenomenon caught Elizabeth Loftus' attention. Women came forward with brutal, suppressed memories. One woman believed she'd endured years of ritualistic abuse, which involved a forced pregnancy and c-section. But, there were no physical scars supporting her memories. Through investigation, Loftus identified a trend of these women discovering repressed memories in psychoanalytic therapy. The therapists would use imagination exercises, dream interpretation, and hypnosis to implant these traumatic false memories.

This is incredibly concerning due to the terrible impact on these women's lives. To experience such severe trauma can and often does determine the trajectory of a person's life.

So, when these therapists permanently implant this trauma, they are risking damage to their patient's trust, world view, relationships, mental health, and so much more.

What does this mean for control as we know it? With how susceptible our memory is to error and the multitude of external factors beyond our influence, control is generally an illusion. I know, this sounds like a cheap answer, similar to the "it was all a dream" ending. But this truth can be a curse or a comfort. It's often human nature to strive for free will and independence. After all, these are the values that the United States is built upon. Take that away and it seems like life is pointless. However, control does exist, but each person plays a smaller part, influencing others with our reactions, communication, and decisions. Each person's control is not the driving force of their individuality, but rather a contributing factor to the bigger story of the world.

This has been Maylee O'Brien with your Bite-Sized Existential Crisis, signing off from the one, the only, 91.3 WHJE. Thank you for listening.