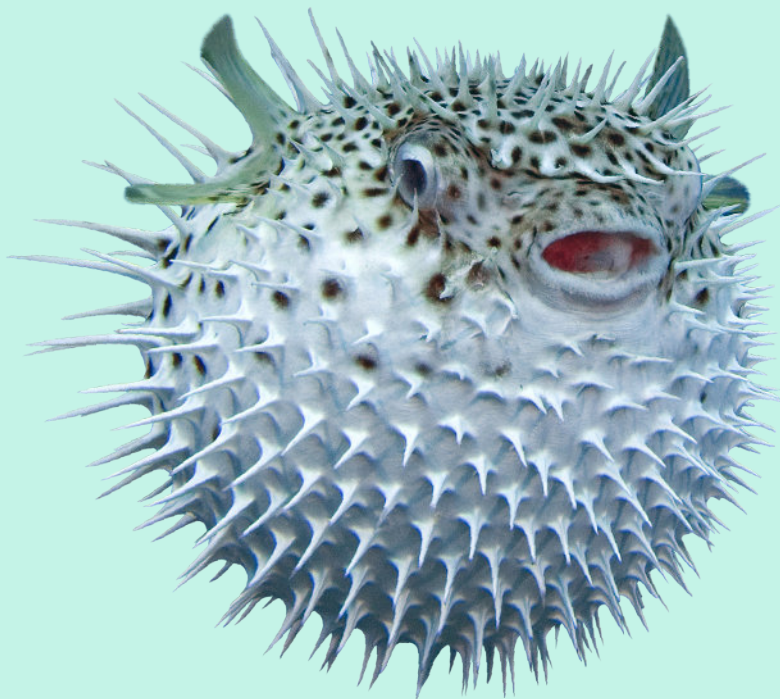


OH!

Snapping at our significant others, elbowing fellow commuters, sending tetchy emails to colleagues: our days are increasingly filled with prickly moments. When did life get so spiky?

WORDS: CATHERINE GRAY



OH, JUST
SOD OFF...

Get off me!" I bellowed at my boyfriend. All he'd done was kiss me on the back of my neck as I frantically chopped vegetables for a dinner with friends. When he gently pointed out that a pan was about to boil over, I snapped, "I know!" (I didn't know) then pointed at the door with the command "Out!" and banished him from the kitchen like a naughty dog.

Later, I wondered why I'd snapped so dramatically. He was being nice. Normally, I'm pretty nice. But something about him touching me at a stressful moment had triggered my inner mean girl. A few days later, on the way to a meeting and stuck behind an elderly lady using a walking stick on the Underground, I gave an overly dramatic sigh. Then, during a phone call, when my mum mentioned that she was worried about me, I blasted her with a shirty, "I'm fine", oblivious to the fact that I clearly wasn't. I was prickly as hell.

Academics are wise to the fact modern life is getting spikier and say that everyday irritability – arguments when someone cuts into the bus queue; snarky comments when you have to pay 5p for a plastic bag; an offish air when a friend deems to call instead of sending a less intrusive text – is a sign of larger and more complex societal issues. Research into recent incidences of anger in the UK has found that 71% of internet users have exploded over computer problems; 50% of shoppers have blown up over parking and 45% of us regularly lose our temper at work. So it's not just me – the world at large is getting pricklier.

To understand being prickly, think of the puffer fish. One of the slower fish to be found in tropical waters, the puffer fish possesses the ability, when threatened, to rapidly inflate with water and trigger the appearance of vicious spikes over its body in a dramatic display of temper. "Prickliness is the human equivalent of those spikes," says psychotherapist Hilda Burke. "It's a defence strategy to get people to back off." Vulnerability and anxiety build up our ammunition against the outside world.

During a 30-year study of 536 subjects newly diagnosed with depression, psychologists found that 54% of them were experiencing irritable episodes. And the irritable group (as opposed to the sad, guilty and lethargic groups) remained depressed for longer, battled more anxiety, and were more likely to fall prey to substance abuse. An academic paper from 2009 even

Helena, 35, a nurse. "I was completely blind-sided, our relationship has been, largely, blissfully happy but he was incredibly stressed at work. The next day, he called me in tears and said he didn't know what had possessed him but he didn't mean it at all. We're still trying to mend the dented trust from those words three weeks on."

Psychologist Terry Erle Clayton,

"THE PUFFER FISH HAS SPIKES. THE PORCUPINE HAS QUILLS AND HUMANS HAVE CORTISOL"

recommends that being snappy should be formally recognised as a potential warning sign of encroaching depression.

"We're all more prone to being prickly nowadays," continues Burke. "First we target rude strangers, then work colleagues, and, finally, let rip at family and friends." The emotional fallout, she says, can result in alienation from friends, disruption in family dynamics and damage to relationships.

And the harm can be felt on both sides: the snapper feels irritable and guilty, while the snapped-at feels hurt and angry. "I had a row with my boyfriend over the phone and he barked at me that he was having 'doubts about our relationship,'" says

author of *Free Yourself from Anger: A Do-It-Yourself Manual For Anger Junkies* warns, "Prickliness is an increasingly common protective strike against an invasive modern world. It's intended as a shield, but since it can hurt those around us, it needs to be kept in check before it gets bigger and more vicious."

The science part

In biological terms, where the puffer fish has spikes and the porcupine has quills, humans have the hormone cortisol. "Prickliness releases a cascade of cortisol into our blood, and triggers the fight-or-flight reaction in our brain," says Clayton. He adds that when we are

irritable, "blood is drained away from our brains and sent to the muscles in case – in primitive terms – we need to flee or wrestle an attacker. The combination of cortisol and blood drain makes our brains less agile. We make bad decisions and are less creative at problem-solving." Hence the propensity to snap or reduce our behaviour to juvenile eye-rolling.

Furthermore, when we prickle, we allow the amygdala – the part of the brain key to reacting to threats – to take over from the prefrontal cortex, the part responsible for moderating social behaviour. "The amygdala is best described as the primitive part of the brain," says Professor Andreas Meyer-Lindenberg, a neuroscientist and director at the Central Institute of Mental Health, in Mannheim, Germany. "It's unsophisticated and irrational. All it wants to do is respond rapidly. In contrast, the prefrontal cortex is rational and the seat of reason. It's like the adult section of the brain." So whenever we display prickly tendencies, the animalistic region of the brain is driving, while the adult part is looking on from the back seat in horror.

Lack of touch

So, why are simple, well-intentioned acts like the touch of a partner increasingly making us bristle?

Like me, corporate lawyer Stacey, 30, has snapped at a misjudged attempt at intimacy by a loved one. "After a horrible day, my husband intimated that I could de-stress in the



→ bedroom. I snapped, 'Are you kidding me?!'"

The answer lies in technology. Despite the social contact allowed by smartphones and digital media, the fact we're more likely to post on friends' Facebook pages than see them in real life is gradually reducing the physical contact in our lives. A 2014 study found that Britons spend more time using tech than they do sleeping; on average, we're asleep for eight hours 21 minutes a day and using our electronic devices for eight hours 41 minutes. "Our face-to-face socialising skills are suffering due to the overuse of email and texts," says Clayton. This greatly increases the likelihood of us over-reacting when we do find ourselves in stifling face-to-face situations, particularly if they are not instigated by us.

"Our entire sense of community has changed," says family and relationship counsellor Deborah Moore. "We still get in touch with people and share information with them constantly, but we're hardly ever physically present." Extensive research by Oxford University has discovered that the rise of social networking has led to people touching less frequently which, in the long term, could damage our personal relationships. We're internalising our worlds and using screens to screen ourselves off.

Time is precious

Another trigger for spiky behaviour is attacks on our precious free time. *Stylist* recently reported that women only have 17 minutes a day to themselves, making us edgy when unforeseen events threaten that time. "I know what I'm doing every hour of every day," says marketing director Sarah, 33. "If an hour gets stolen by a delayed train, I start to feel panicky."

This time panic, says Moore, is to do with our need for control and growing fear of the unexpected. "So much of our lives are plannable that we're increasingly suspicious of any interaction that might throw our schedule off course." Our impatience is so acute that 40% of us will abandon a web page that takes more than three seconds to load. Amazon worked out that each second of delay could cost them \$1.6 billion in lost sales a year.

Communication analyst Sophie Richardson agrees, "We are reacting to challenging, changing conditions. We're stressed because we don't feel as though we're ever

allowed to switch off. We know it's impossible to manage everyone's expectations and we start to subconsciously resent them. So we snap and lash out."

Our surroundings also have an intense effect on our reactions: specifically the volume of people living and working around us. Professor Meyer-Lindenberg was involved with a brain imaging study in 2011 which showed that urban-dwellers respond to social stress (such as being told to hurry up) with markedly more negative emotions than country-dwellers. "Brain scans demonstrated that city people have hyperactive amygdalas: they switch into fight-or-flight mode more often,"

he reveals. "We're meant to live in smaller groups of around 150 people. In cities, something as trivial as someone invading your personal space is more likely to activate the circuits in the amygdala section of the brain." Indeed, a survey of more than 5,500 commuters across European cities found that many rate the strain of their daily journey as being on a par with the breakdown of a relationship.

Compounding the problem is the fact that where people are in close proximity to each other, irritable rudeness can be 'caught' like a cold. A recent University of Florida study showed that micro-aggression is actually

contagious. This means that queues, supermarkets, public transport and the workplace in particular, can become petri dishes which breed prickliness. "Guerrilla 'I am too busy and important to be polite' tactics can be prized and rewarded in today's workplace," says Burke. "Irritable retorts often trickle down from the top. So, if you have a snippy boss, you're likely to mimic that behaviour."

The antidote

But being spiky isn't an entirely negative situation. "It can be a sign that a boundary has been breached," reveals Burke, "like an inbuilt alarm system sounding in our brains, alerting us to an intruder." Investigating the trigger for this alarm can lead to uncovering dysfunctional situations and behaviour, which we can then rectify.

Psychological experts believe that when we drill down to the source of our tetchiness what we find is not anger, but fear. "Fear of being inadequate, of being devalued, of being ignored, or of rejection, fear that you're being accused of something. These feelings run deep," says Clayton. "The way to retract your spikes is to know your triggers. And have tools such as cognitive behavioural therapy techniques at the ready."

So, if being surrounded and overwhelmed by people often brings you to the brink, Meyer-Lindenberg has a novel solution, "The hyperactive urbanite amygdala can be soothed with nature. Urban parks are an impressive resource. Even looking at pictures of green space, water and trees can help calm you."

Researching this piece has made me think hard about what provokes me: when I feel criticised, belittled or patronised. It's when my time feels stolen or when my personal space is invaded, which is why people trying to 'help' me while I'm cooking, an unexpected house guest bowling up, or audible text keyboard clicks on the train can all activate my spikes. Knowing these triggers has made me more self-aware. Yesterday, a man pushed in front of me in the Starbucks queue. I opened my mouth to scold him, but then remembered that I get to choose whether or not this stranger provokes me and ruins my peace of mind. I closed my mouth and chose to preserve my serenity. To prickle is human; to learn from it is divine.

WHAT TYPE OF PRICKLY ARE YOU?

Soften your spikes with the advice below

THE GENTLE GRUMP

Bad manners and simple misunderstandings are likely to trigger your best eye-rolling or tutting. "Try to respond calmly with TTT breathing," says psychologist Terry Erle Clayton. Place the Tip of your Tongue behind your front Teeth then breathe in for a count of four, out for four and repeat. It will help engage the prefrontal cortex, rather than the fight-or-flight part of the brain."

THE DOMESTIC SNAPPER

You might be holding up well at work but at home you're snapping at those you cherish most. "The cortisol fog after a testing day can last for up to three hours," explains Clayton. "But people in good physical shape can flush it from their systems more quickly. Indulge in exercise or take a brisk walk to burn the pressure off."

THE SHARP TONGUE

Taking exception to a colleague's comment or objecting to a stranger's tweet are early steps towards more repetitive spiky behaviour. "Twitter wars have normalised nastiness and we dodge the emotional price of being snippy with colleagues when we do it digitally," says psychotherapist Hilda Burke. Ask yourself, 'Would I say this to their face?' before you type.

THE DEFENSIVE TYPE

Strangers, colleagues, family... you're convinced that everyone is criticising you, which means frequent explosions. "If you blow up in self-defence, ask yourself: was the attack real or imagined?" says Burke. "Listen to what people actually say, rather than what you think you hear and you'll probably find most perceived criticisms are in your head."

