

# THE “KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN” STRATEGY

**Wojciech Eichelberger** talks to *Academia* magazine about the sources of people’s indifference and the motivations behind it.

## What lies at the roots of people’s indifference?

WOJCIECH EICHELBERGER: We can be indifferent for all sorts of reasons, and I won’t be able to cover them all during a single discussion. But the most common causes are fear, suffering, and idleness.

Many people appear callous because traumatic experiences have led them to develop a thick skin. In this case, indifference is a form of psychological defense mechanism, protecting individuals from experiencing pain and shutting out pain experienced in the past, usually during childhood or adolescence. Such attitudes are often accompanied by a superiority complex and a desire to retaliate against people perceived as having failed to support them in their time of need, or lashing out against those they see as fools who haven’t experienced real life or real suffering.

Another common reason for indifference is a fear of becoming involved, driven by a fear of people and the world as a whole. This usually has its roots in childhood, when adults persistently feed children bad advice such as “stay out of it or you’ll get in trouble,” “keep your head down,” “stay out of this,” “people are bad and dangerous” and encourage passivity and meekness. All this encourages children to withdraw and seek a false sense of security in remaining passive and indifferent.

Yet another reason for indifference is hedonism and moral indolence mixed with ignorance. This is simply a matter of convenience – it allows the person to ignore evil, wrongdoing and suffering which would shatter their naïve, sugar-coated perception of the world. This is the childhood attitude of prioritizing one’s own pleasure, comfort and security, extended onward into adulthood.

## Are people born with different degrees of indifference?

The only innate traits are sensory sensitivity and the responsiveness of the nervous system, neither of which determine one’s degree of indifference. Ac-

ording to an ancient theory, there are four fundamental personality types – sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic – yet in reality people with all types of personality can exhibit both empathy and indifference. Any innate temperament, if such exists, is therefore not a predisposition to indifference. Rather, indifference is an acquired trait, learned through experience and an attribute of the individual’s defense strategy.

## What’s the difference between indifference and tolerance?

Tolerating someone or something first requires experiencing some level of discomfort. However, indifference is such a generalized attitude or trait, it prevents us from feeling any discomfort which we would need to tolerate.

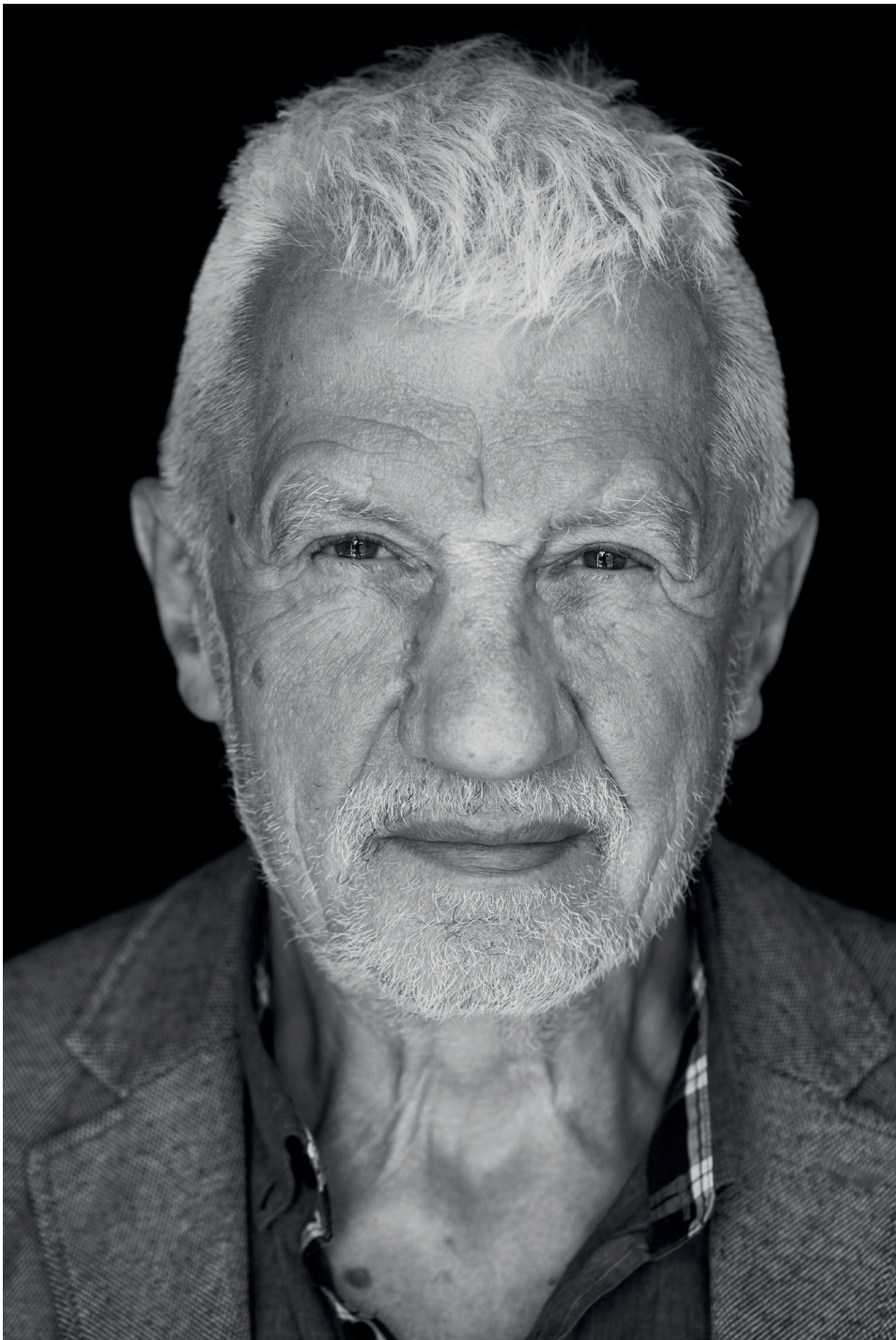
## How about indifference and apathy?

Apathy and depression can both make us indifferent, but neither is an innate trait or a learned strategy. They both have somatic, psychological roots. Apathy manifests as a lack of energy and even the will to live, which may be caused by hormonal imbalance, anemia, chronic illness, burnout or depression. It can also be the result of a past or current traumatic experience or difficult personal circumstances.

People experiencing apathy may want to react to a given situation but they may simply lack the energy to become emotionally engaged and actively respond.

## Is indifference a strategy adopted by oversensitive people – their way of protecting themselves from the world when they feel like they can’t take any more?

It may be. But indifference cannot simply be adopted as a temporary response to a situation. Of course it’s possible to feign indifference and suppress sympathy or anger, but true indifference – the kind which distances us from our feelings – is formed over prolonged



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periods, with the person's mentality being shaped by their social group or difficult personal circumstances. Additionally, people whose jobs regularly expose them to suffering or death tend to become desensitized; although this may appear similar to indifference, it frequently conceals great sensitivity. This can be experienced by doctors working with patients with terminal illnesses, surgeons, staff at nursing and care homes and hospices, paramedics, frontline soldiers, officers investigating violent crime and murder and workers at

factory farms and abattoirs. Here, desensitization can be essential and generally only presents at the workplace; it is situational, since it would be impossible to be fully empathetic while witnessing the suffering and death of others for long periods. If it weren't for this mental strategy, the psychological burden would be too great for people to carry out these incredibly demanding, difficult and essential jobs.

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