

Crochet to the rescue!

Crocheters and knitters around the world will have identified with the 98-year-old lady, Maria D'Antuono who was pulled out of the Italian earthquake rubble 30 hours after the event (April 2009). She'd coped with her long incarceration through crocheting and it set my mind thinking about how it could have helped her manage those long, distressing hours.

The most obvious benefit which springs to mind is that the action of crochet would have distracted her from the situation she found herself in. The sheer terror of the tremor experience must have been intensely traumatic but it would have been followed by the realisation that she was still alive, unharmed AND that her crochet was close at hand. Just imagine her relief!

Research has shown that the process of distraction works to divert your brain's attention away from unpleasant situations, even high levels of pain. So Maria's crocheting may also have literally taken her mind off any pain or discomfort which she almost certainly would have experienced as a result of her age and finding herself in a cramped environment for so long.

The feeling of being buried alive would strike terror into even the bravest of hearts so the rhythmical movements of crochet would have induced that familiar meditative-like state which would have calmed her anxiety and panic helping her to survive those long hours alone. Those of us who crochet and knit know that those familiar movements bring instant feelings of calm which would have been highly comforting for the elderly Maria.

Research in animals has shown that repetitive movements enhance the release of the neurotransmitter serotonin. Serotonin is calming, an analgesic and it raises mood so the repetitive movements of her craft may have been beneficial in this way too.

Maria will almost certainly have picked up her crochet as something enjoyable to occupy herself with, or perhaps she may have deliberately crocheted for its therapeutic comforting effects. Neither she, nor probably her doctors, however, would have known that it might just have helped her recovery over future months, too...

In 2004, psychologist Dr Emily Holmes carried out a study which showed that performing a repetitive visuospatial task during or shortly after a traumatic event could significantly reduce the number of flashbacks – a symptom of Post Traumatic Stress – suffered as a result of a traumatic experience. This study was enlarged on in 2008 by Dr Holmes and Dr Catherine Deeprise of Oxford University. They used the computer game 'Tetris' and showed that participants who played this game during or shortly after watching traumatic video footage had significantly fewer flashbacks than those who performed no activity. It's thought that visuospatial movement may interfere with the consolidation of recently triggered visual memories to 'reduce unwanted involuntary memory flashbacks whilst leaving deliberate memory recall of the event intact.'

Dr Holmes in her first paper surmised that knitters who knitted alongside the guillotine during the French Revolution might not have suffered flashbacks. Little did the 98-year-old Maria know that she might be protecting her mind in the same way!

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