

A day in the life...

Stop looking. I shake once. They look away.

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Editorial Columnist

Editor's note: Farrell is a 45-year-old man. This story represents a composite day in his life.

My name is Jim, I'm 50 years old and I shake my head. I do it thousands of times a day.

I don't know why I shake my head. Nobody does. I've done it all my life. My father thinks it's psychological, my psychologist thinks it's neurological and my neurologist is baffled. My minister tells me to pray.

I try to pray. Kneeling at the side of my bed, I try. I can't.

So I cry. I cry with a deep sense of uselessness.

I hit my head in the darkness and shake it, then in a row — hard, repetitive, downward thrusts. My headbush sways. I take a deep breath and put my right hand on the back of my neck.

Now I pray. It's selfish prayer — I use it every night. "Dear Lord, help me. I don't want to shake anymore." I shake again anyway, crawl under the covers and go to sleep.

"Ezzzzz." The alarm . . . 6:30 . . . morning damn. I roll over in the crumpled rust sheets, shut off the alarm and lay my arm across Susan, my wife. Calm, peace. My head is empty, relaxed. It rests deep into my overused pillow. Just a few more minutes.

I'm up. I shower, shave and watch the morning news. Not many shakes — 20 in two hours.

It's 6:50 now, time to leave for my first class. I turn my head but am left out of the 17th Street alley and stop at the D Street light. The seconds . . . 30 seconds . . . 45 . . . Green.

My hands grip the wheel tightly, my heart rate quickens. A rush of nervousness sweeps through my body.

My hands fly off the wheel and clench into fists on either side of my head. My head shakes forward, hard. Then, my brain bounces into my skull. I shift in my seat and try to massage my neck. An immense tightness builds into a frenzied, paralyzing fear.

Bam, bam, bam. The strikes come in clusters. The feelings disappear. I shake again, but only once. I sigh and lean against the headrest.

A guy in a red Volkswagen stares at me from the center lane. "Take a picture, ya sonofabitch." Green light . . . 20, 30, 35. I make the next four lights and leave the Volkswagen in my rear view mirror.

I park, and my left hand grabs my back as my right hand grabs the back of my neck for support. I walk quickly. The butterflies are back.

Lots of students. My eyes dart quickly from person to person. Are they watching me? I shake quickly, without warning. Everybody's watching. Why do I do this?

Class time. I'm not sure enough to get my favorite seat in the back. I sit at a community table with eight others. I know them all.

The lecture starts. No shakes, breathe, breathe, control. Not now, please. Shake, shake, bam, bam, bam. When the professor looks at me and continues his lecture. Instinctively, my left hand grabs the back of my neck as my left elbow rests on the table.

The guy across the table stares at me, asking questions with his eyes. I stare back at him, hard, with my answer. Don't look at me like that. I'm sorry I bothered you. I can't help it. Stop looking. I shake once, right at him. He looks away.

I walk quickly out of Avery Hall and jog to Oldfather Hall. I'm scheduled to interview a professor on translation. And I don't want to look bad.

I'm working for the Lincoln Journal. It's a prized part-time job. Deep breath, smile.

I turn the tape recorder off. "Thank you, sir," I say. "You've been a big help. May I call you if I have any further questions? Thank you, goodbye."

Ha! I did it. No shakes. But I shake at least 30 times in the elevator coming down from the 12th floor.

The glass door marked "Lincoln Journal" creaks open. Flapp. I set my yellow legal pad down beside a computer terminal and begin my story. I'm stuck. What's my lead?

Breathe, breathe, breathe . . . oh, God. I get up fast and walk to the

bathroom. Two people say "hi." "How are you, today?" they ask.

"Fine," I say, and continue to walk. I'm lying. Whoosh, the bathroom door shuts out the world. I stare in the wide mirror at myself. I look normal. I shake at my reflection. It shakes back. God, is that how I look?

Back at the terminal. So many people. So many notes. Gotta get this story done. Bam, bam, bam-bam — a grand slam. Nobody noticed.

My first paragraph is smooth. I like it. My neck burns with tightness. I sink low in my chair, bending forward, and shake twice. The terminal blocks anyone from seeing me.

Finally the story is done. It was a long one — 25 inches, at least 50 shakes. Fifty-one, 52, 53. A woman at the corner desk notices, then pretends she didn't. I'm embarrassed. I get up to leave.

I stop and peer around a brown partition at the newroom I just left. They're laughing at the desk in the corner. The woman who pretended not to see me, shakes her head and smiles. The guy she's talking to shrugs his shoulders and throws up his hands. He doesn't know why I shake. Why should he, I don't know myself. A single tear runs down my cheek as I run down the stairs and out of the building.

I drive 60 mph to an electronic banking terminal to put in my check. I walk up the concrete steps without a shake, noticing myself in the full-length glass

door. I need a haircut. I wish my eyes were blue.

Inside, I remove my card from my wallet and push the computer buttons.

"Transaction is being processed. Please wait," the screen flashes in green computer type. I shake uncontrollably, and grab my head with both hands.

Behind a smoky gray plate of glass above the banking machine, I see a camera. Is everybody watching me? I perform an exaggerated number of shakes for the camera and flick the glass with the back of my hand. Damn camera.

Shake, shake, bam, bam-bam. I enter the Flinky Dinky grocery with \$35 from the bank machine. Two teen-age girls stop halfway through the automatic exit. They stare. They look straight at me, then at each other, then back at me, and giggle. I don't know them. What do I care what a couple of silly girls think anyway?

I grab a cart, pick up meat, milk, bread and other essentials, leaving assorted stares and confused looks behind. I want to take each person aside and tell them the story of my life, and the history of my problem. But I can't. There are just too many people.

The produce aisle. And again with no warning — shake, shake, bam-bam. I grimace with pain. A 40-year-old woman in glasses laughs out loud at my head motions.

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