



Understanding and Overcoming Fear

by JUDY BERANGER

Often people mistakenly believe that unpleasant emotional states such as fear and anxiety “just happen to me” and that we have little or no control over their presence, intensity or duration. A more accurate depiction is that how I choose to think about my fear largely determines how much of my emotional resources it consumes. Choosing to focus on worry and repeated, negative thinking can escalate fear and anxiety to new heights, potentially with devastating results. It can further create unclear reasoning and induce a fight or flight response. Caught up in fear-based thinking, we are more likely to lash out at others. How can learning about fear help us understand and come to grips with our own fears? What strategies can help us to tame our fears and allow us to make the most out of our personal resources?

Expressions of fear arise from endless situations:

- *I know my administrator has a problem with me. Every time I am around her I feel afraid and break out in a sweat. I don't send her good vibes and she doesn't send me good vibes either.*
- *I am sick and tired of being the only one who ends up caring for our parents. My other siblings say I am a teacher and have more time than they do. I fear I will say something to them that I will regret.*
- *I was shocked to find out my partner was seeing someone for over a year. We are getting help now but I am too afraid to trust him again.*
- *A student swore at me and threatened me last year. I still go in fear and panic mode when I see her.*

Fear is defined as the emotional response to danger, whether imagined or real, and the subsequent biological or physical responses that can result. What underscores fear in all its permutations is the feeling that we won't be all right. We can lessen these feelings by understanding our biological reactions, learning how to minimize them, and even retrain them. Larry Dossey, author of *One Mind*, says that “nature has endowed us with healthy fears – e.g., the lion in the bush (fight or flight) – but most fears in modern life are unhealthy, often destructive and prevent us from achieving our greatest potential.”

Our temperament, family culture and life experiences all influence how we create, interpret and process our fears. Psychiatrist Mark Goulston says that self-defeating behaviors occur when we fail to learn the lessons that life tries to teach us. Self-defeating actions are coping mechanisms that begin as an attempt to make ourselves feel better and often have their roots in childhood experience. Experts suggest that as few as two life shocks in succession can propel us into a life of fear. The first shock destroys our sense of safety and trustworthiness/loyalty while the second imprints a “this might happen again” attitude. If unchecked or unchallenged by reason, we may adopt fear-based language that can grow stronger. Without appropriate help, the debilitating impact on our body and soul can be worse than what had first happened to us! Goulston believes we can change these actions from self-defeating to life-enhancing. Difficult though it may be, we can change the internal conversations from self-defeating to life-enhancing.

Types of Fear

Intense fear that is out of proportion to the danger that it may cause, is called a phobia. The literature suggests phobias affect about ten percent of adults. Cell biologist Bruce Lipton tells us chronic fears that result in stress can undermine health and lead to disease and death. M.D. Lissa Rankin says that stress is fear, anxiety, and worry dressed up in more socially acceptable clothing. Rankin says that “80 percent of visits to the doctor are believed to be stress related.”

Phobias include: agoraphobia (fear of crowds, open spaces, and travel); social phobia (fear of humiliation and embarrassment); nostophobia (fear of a specific illness, fear of death); common like phobias (animals, insects, heights, airplanes, enclosure, germs, open or closed spaces). Martin Seligman suggests close to one-half of phobia cases begin with a traumatic incident in childhood while others appear to emerge unexpectedly and without explanation in adolescence or early adulthood. Fear can be helpful as a natural response to danger, but when self-created such as the fear of

failure or rejection, of being out of control, being different or being lonely can cause havoc on our body. You may fear love because you fear being rejected; fear sharing your thoughts or feelings in case you appear wrong; and fear trusting because you are dominated by self-doubt and insecurity.

What to do...strategies for harnessing your fear

There are numerous strategies aimed at calming our system by encouraging endorphins to take over from a body releasing fear-inducing hormone like cortisol. They include:

- Literally working your fear, gain an understanding of its origins and impact on your life. Taking on fear in this way will stimulate commitment to this task and allow you to make healthier choices based on your growing wisdom.
- Focus on your breathing. Breathing calms the sympathetic nervous system, our “fight-flight” response and oxygenates the brain. Perceived threats such as non-appreciative bosses, students, parents, colleagues and others who act disrespectful or belligerent can mean that we don’t burn off the flight-flight response. Instead, the stress chemicals and hormones in our body become elevated and persistently present. Physical signs of this include a tight neck, bunched-up shoulders, shallow breathing, a tight chest, and a tension headache.
- Do physical movements to raise the release of endorphins and overall confidence. Clean your living spaces, run/walk, yoga, meditation, tai chi, stretching will all work. This uses the adrenaline energy, and helps with calming emotions while reducing the amount of toxins building up in muscles.
- Commit to a growth mindset. Think about what worked to move from a traumatic incident in the past. Repeat what worked while adding new strategies.
- Imagine the best scenarios. Monitor worry – chronic worriers tend to misuse their imaginations to the extent that upcoming events feel like catastrophes waiting to happen.
- Monitor emotions, what pushes our buttons, how we act and react to others, evaluate whether we want to adjust the behavior. An emotional trigger could be as simple/complex as hearing the wind on a rainy night – finding it “creepy” as it triggers bad memories.
- Use “the thinking brain” by scaling our fear from 1-10 with 10 being most horrific to 1 being totally relaxed. This will dilute the emotion and begin to calm you down.
- Learn to reduce conflict by naming and managing it. Find constructive ways to cope while gently asserting yourself.
- Visualize – imagine seeing yourself in a situation you were dreading. See yourself being calm, composed, cool, and comfortable and things going well. Practicing this starts to recondition your mind to feel calmer while giving you the energy to act confident.
- Increase your intake of foods that are high in tryptophan such as bananas, nuts, sesame seeds, soy, oats, cheese, and natural peanut butter. Tryptophan helps boost your brain’s calm mood.
- Consider your diet and drink plenty of water. Sugar and caffeine are culprits in fueling your flight or fight responses.
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation – the body responds to fear by tightening muscles to prepare you to run. This tension can cause muscle aches, fatigue and headaches – progressive muscle relaxation helps relieve the muscle tension. In a comfortable position, sitting or lying down, take a few deep breaths while letting your body go as limp as possible. Begin by tightening the muscles in your toes... hold to a count of ten... then relax. Enjoy the relief of tension melting. Do the same by flexing your foot muscles, and move slowly through your entire body: calves, legs, stomach, back, neck, jaw, face, contracting and releasing each area.
- Studies have shown that emotion is contagious. Be mindful of what you are letting rub off on you.
- Have a relaxing bath or shower – physical warmth is very soothing and helps relieve stress.
- Joyce Schwarz suggests the GRABS formula: show gratitude, release judgements, acknowledge progress, ask for guidance, believe in your possibilities and share your bounty.
- Move from being reflexive and impulsive to reflective and thoughtful. Grow awareness to every part of your body.

A teacher recently told me that facing her fear has allowed her to act from inner wisdom rather than acting from protection only. Our thoughts, beliefs, personalities and attitudes have a profound influence on the maintenance of fear and anxiety. As author Katherine Paterson once said, “To fear is one thing. To let fear grab you by the tail and swing you around is another.” Author Max Lucado reminds us that fear will always knock at our door, just don’t invite it in for dinner and for heaven’s sake, don’t offer it a bed for the night!

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