

## Dealing with FEAR

To understand effective techniques for dealing with fear it is important to know exactly what Fear is, and is not. Fear is a condition, something which you have (as in having a cold). I.e. “I have this fear”. Having fear, then, is quite different from Being Afraid. Being afraid indicates a state of action, symbolic of the flight or fight concept.

What does this suggest?

If you are afraid you have the ability to act. That is, you decide whether or not you will stay and deal with the perceived threat, or you will flee the threat. If you have fear you simply have a condition, from which no action may arise. This implies that fear is paralyzing, disabling the ability to act because there is nothing specific from which action may come about. So it is that in the question and action portion of this section fear has been described as the Devil, a stealer of human potential.

How can you deal with fear, something that all of us have had at some time or other, and something that most of us still carry with us?

The most important tool in the fight against fear is to name it. While seemingly obvious and easy to do, this is very difficult task and not to be taken lightly.

One reason why it is so hard to name fears is that the human mind is very subtle and can trick its owner into thinking that the fear had been named when only a superficial or symptomatic symbol of the fear had been identified.

The second reason it is hard to name fears is because we invest heavily in our fears. It takes great effort to build a fear and maintain it. Remove this fear brings the threat of internal judgement about the cost of that investment, and its relative worth. So once again, the fear holder will tend to avoid naming fears so that s/he does not have to face the reality of having invested in something of little or no value.

Finally, fear is hard to fight because it has no face, no substance, it just is. It is, in effect, the nameless unknown. The natural inclination of humankind is to resist the unknown. There are two significant causes which enable the average individual to risk the unknown

The potential payoff is very large  
Unhappiness with the current situation exceeds any potential risk.

It is amazing just how much unhappiness is tolerated by a person because “at least I know this pain”. So it follows that by reducing the risk and/or increasing the perceived payoff (the element of the unknown), it is possible to change behaviors with less effort. From here the value of naming fears becomes obvious.

With this background, and the assumption that you, the reader, must be interested in changing

something in your life that is impacted by fear (why else would you invest in reading this article?), we proceed with the first step in dealing with fear.

### The First Big Step - Name That Fear

To name your fear(s) you must take out a pen and paper. Find a place that is very comfortable for you, and ensure that you have no distractions or interruptions (not even your favorite pet). You should be in the company of just that piece of paper and the pen. Do not even have on music, as music (or the TV or radio) enable evasions. Spread the paper out in front of you, put the pen down, and just relax. Take some time to become quiet, let your breathing relax, your body adjust to its position, and become comfortable with the blank page. Make no effort to think of anything at all, just enjoy relaxing .

After some time you should find yourself calm and feeling comfortable. Now you are ready to proceed. Think of what it is that you wish to change in your life, or the problem that has kept you occupied without apparent answer. For example: it might be a fear of flying; a fear of heights; a fear of a new relationship, a fear of leaving a relationship, fears around business or occupations, or maybe even a fear of death. Once done you may exclaim “Ah ha!, I have just named my fear”. Unfortunately not. So far you have only identified the area of your fear.

Now, stretch your imagination, and visualize what the worst thing is that could possibly happen if your fear came true. Write it down. Then do it again, imagine what the worst thing is that could happen if the worst thing that could happen happened. Once more, write it down. Then start all over again, imagine all other worst things that could happen. In each case write down the answers and what would happen if that worst thing happened. Here is an example:

A man had lost his job as a senior executive. He was in his early 50's, a seasoned manager, had a professional education, was well thought of, and well connected. The years before the loss of his job had been stressful and had come to despise working for a major company. He had often thought of becoming an engineering consultant, something for which he was well qualified. He came to me a couple of months after losing his job, looking wane and worn out. He had been unsuccessful in doing anything, even putting out his resume for another job. I asked him what was going on and he said that he was paralyzed and could not do anything, that even getting out of bed was hard for him to do. When I asked why, he said that he was filled with fear.

When I asked what kind of fear he had, he looked at me in a perplexed manner and was not able to answer the question. Therefore, I led him through a series of questions about his range of professional possibilities, being careful not to probe too closely about his feelings, or showing any judgement about his worries. Finally he reached the stage where he could identify his primary - illustrative - fears. These were a fear of being rejected if he applied for a job, and a fear of becoming a consultant. For the purposes of this example, we will only proceed with the fear of being a consultant.

We proceeded through a number of worst things that could happen if he became a consultant. In brief they went something like this:

- I might not be successful, ... therefore
- I might not make enough money, ... therefore
- I might have to get a job.

This last one, I might have to get a job, was his ultimate, last worst fear. In other words, the worse possible event that could happen to him if he became a consultant was that he would fail and have to do what he did before (or was thinking of doing by putting out his resume). Needless to say we had a pretty laugh about that one. Once his fears had been named and laid out, he was able to develop a plan to minimize the risk of failure and went on to become a pretty good consultant.

In another example, a friend expressed a fear of heights. We proceeded through the process of worst case scenarios which tracked like this:

- I have a fear of heights
- I might fall
- I might get hurt
- I might die.

Interestingly, it took some effort before he was able to state that his underlying worry was that he might die. Once he saw that fear he was able to think about dying and what that had to do with heights. In reality, it was not very much. He did, however, have a vertigo problem. So he decided that all he needed to do was exercise practical care when near the edge of a deck, or whatever. He was surprised that he was afraid of dying and has begun to investigate this issue. However, he no longer has a fear of heights.

### The Second Big Step - The Fight or Flight Plan

This is where you take your worst case scenario - now an item that has been named and clearly identified, and decide how you want to deal with it. For example, in the case of the man with the fear of heights, he discovered that he had vertigo and needed to deal with that sensation when around the edges of high places (which could be something as low as a deck). He correctly reasoned that he could not always avoid the edges of high places. So the plan he developed centered around making sure that he held onto guard rails, exercised care in how he used his eyes (avoiding quickly looking down over edges), and generally worked to ensure that he stayed a safe distance from unprotected edges. This action plan was reasonable and prudent. He no longer had a fear of heights. He was, instead, managing a physical/chemical issue around vertigo. While there is still some distance to go on his fear of death, at least he knows what the issue is and no longer breaks into a cold sweat just thinking about a cliff edge.

Should it happen that what you are afraid of is a major event, and indeed life threatening (as some threats truly are) you will be in a position to take action and avoid the threat to your person. Again, if all you had was fear, you would not have anything to act upon. It is ok to be afraid, this is a normal, healthy condition that protects the human body from harm. Having fear, on the other hand, only seizes the mind in a cloud of unknown and unnamed conditions for which there is no

cure.

Once again, make certain that you write down all of your worst case scenarios, as well as your action plans to resolve them.

### The Third Big Step - Visualize The Rewards

At the beginning of this article we discussed that two things help overcome fear - the second of which is a perceived payoff. To help remove the uncertainty of the future it is important to have a sense of what your new future might look like.

Turn to a new page, then write down how you would see yourself if you did not have your fear, or if you were doing your new activity. When doing so, imagine how you feel, how it feels when you encounter situations that used to terrify you, how it feels in your new success when dealing with family, your significant other, and friends. Take your time and be explicit. The more detail you can provide, the better. Enjoy the sights, smells, sensations and good feelings of your new world. Write these responses down, write a little story about your new self. The more you do, the better it will be.

This written image will do two things for you - help you overcome needless fear, and create a image for self fulfilling prophesies to work.

Finally, don't expect overnight miracles. New habits take time, energy and perseverance. Yet, they are possible if pursued with the right tools.