

Free Yourself From Fears

From Chapter One

The nine laws of fear

1 Fear is a basic human emotion that has evolved to protect us.

2 Fear is a reaction to a mixture of a real outside event or trigger and the meaning we make of it in our imagination.

3 Behind all fear is a fear of losing something we value.

4 There are two types of fear: authentic and unreal. Authentic fear is a natural reaction to real and present danger. Unreal fear comes from our imagination.

5 The feeling of fear is always real—whatever provokes it.

6 All fear has a positive intention.

7 We are born with two basic fears: falling and abandonment.

We learn other fears by:

—Example.

—Trauma.

—Repetition.

—Information.

8 Fear can be enjoyable if:

—We believe that the situation is safe.

—We feel confident that there is no real danger.

—We know that the situation will end at a definite time.

9 We can talk ourselves into feeling afraid.

What Is Fear?

Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed.

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY FEAR? What does it mean to be afraid? Fear is a basic emotion that protects us. Fear is undeniable, that unpleasant sensation that arises when we think we are in danger. The danger may be real or imaginary. The word “fear” comes from the old English root *fer* or *ferē*, meaning “danger,” or “coming suddenly upon.” It is interesting that the root of the word suggests there is danger that we are not prepared for. If we are prepared, then we may not feel afraid. The word “fear” itself is an abstraction. The feeling comes from a process in the body that is triggered by something we see, hear, feel, touch, taste, or smell. And these sights, sounds, and feelings can arise from the outside world or from our imagination. Whatever the origin, fear is not something we have, but something we do.

The first law of fear:

Fear is a basic human emotion that has evolved to protect us.

Fear is not a pleasant emotion. It can range from a mild apprehension to a gut-wrenching, heart-pumping jolt that rises like a fiery volcanic eruption before congealing in the pit of the stomach like cooling lava. It rises immediately when we hear a bump in the night, or see an open window that we didn’t leave open. It can ambush us and make us act without thinking. You may be happily relaxing when you suddenly realize that you left your private computer files in plain view at the office—before you know it, you have risen half out of your chair. Fear can also sneak up gradually, for example as that long-deferred visit to the dentist gets closer and closer, or that public speaking engagement that you agreed to in a moment of madness creeps up the calendar toward you like a snake.

As a rule, the more immediate the perceived danger, the more sharp, unpleasant and compelling the fear becomes. We move immediately. We act!

The two elements of fear

All fear has two elements. The first is a stimulus from the outside world. The second is the meaning we make of that stimulus and the imaginings we create about it.

The second law of fear:

The feeling of fear is a reaction to the mixture of:

- 1 A real outside event that acts as a trigger.
- 2 The meaning we make of it in our imagination.

These two elements can combine in myriad ways. Here are some examples.

The power of gravity

Imagine for a moment that you are walking alone in the country, thinking about nothing in particular. Dusk is falling and you almost stumble into a deep pit. You pull back just in time, jolted back to the present moment, your heart thumping. It all happens in half a second. The outside stimuli were the pit and your stumble; you feel frightened, you were suddenly in danger of falling, perhaps of hurting yourself badly. Falling is an archetypal fear from infancy.

This is authentic fear. It is about a real, immediate danger and about something in the present moment. It is very useful: it saves you from immediate danger and possible injury.

You know the power of gravity, so you do not think twice: your body makes a decision to pull back before you are consciously aware of it. You do not wait, balancing with your foot poised over the blackness, intellectually debating the possibility of whether it is a good idea to fall down the hole or not—you act immediately. The imaginings come *after* you have taken action to avoid the danger. They usually follow too quickly to dwell on in detail—images of you falling into the blackness and hurting yourself. The meaning is: “Danger! Take care!” After that come other thoughts: perhaps you resolve to pay more attention to where you are going when you walk in unfamiliar country in the dark. Then you may get angry that someone left a dangerous pit uncovered without a warning sign. Anger and fear are close relatives. In this example you stumble into danger, but you stay safe. The fear comes from the immediate stimulus and only after that from your imaginings of what might have happened.

A deserted alley

Here is another example. You are walking down a dark alley late at night when you hear footsteps behind you. You take a quick look around and see a powerfully built stranger swathed in a large black coat gaining on you with long strides. His face is partially hidden in the shadows.

You quicken your pace. But so, it seems, does he.

Now you start to feel apprehensive, you wonder why you are walking down a dark, deserted alley late at night. The alternative route is longer but better lit and more frequently used.

Thoughts run swiftly through your mind as you briefly debate the possible scenarios.

“I was stupid. How far is the other end of the alley? ... If I started running now would I make it? ... Suppose I started yelling? ... That’s stupid. ... He’s just someone walking down the alley going home like

me. ... Then why is he speeding up when I do? ... Have I got anything that I could use as a weapon?"

You cross the road.

So does he.

Then you run.

That is a real situation in the present moment. Nothing has happened, but the situation is potentially dangerous. The fear makes you run, you weigh up the evidence and decide to take action. Better to look stupid than to get hurt. This fear is genuine, it happens in the present moment: there may not be real danger but you don't wait to find out. The fear is a mixture of the stimulus and your imaginings about it. If the stranger attacked you, then the fear would be strong, immediate, and authentic.

How do you decide if a situation is truly dangerous? Are you running from a real danger, or from a fantasy of what might happen? You may never know, and it is often safer that way. In this example the fear is useful: it makes you take action to get away from a potentially dangerous situation.

The parachute jump

Now a third circumstance. You decide to do a sponsored parachute jump to raise money for charity. You take the training, learn how to fall, discover how to operate the parachute (safely on the ground), and are excited about the whole idea. You and your companions feel a bond of friendship; you are all willing to put yourselves in danger to raise money for charity.

The fateful day approaches. You do not sleep so well the night before and wake up excited. Your apprehension grows as you travel to the airfield: maybe part of you hopes the car will break down or the plane will not be able to fly because of bad weather. You get on the airplane and watch the ground recede. If in the past you have been afraid of flying, this day you are not—now you are afraid of leaving the safety of the airplane. Of course, you laugh and joke and do not let people know what you are feeling.

At 7,000 feet up you get ready to jump, it's your turn. You are terrified. Why? Because your imagination has constructed all sorts of scenarios ranging from falling to the ground like a stone if your parachute does not open, to breaking a leg when you land awkwardly, or drifting out to sea. You have never jumped out of an airplane before and now it seems like a crazy thing to do. However, you trust your training. You trust your instructor. You feel confident that you know what to do. You believe that parachutes work and that the odds against yours not working are very, very small. It is important to make the jump because you have been sponsored by many friends and relatives for a large amount of money. And of course your sense of pride won't let you back out now. So you take a deep breath, commend your soul to your God, and jump...

The parachute opens, of course.

A few minutes later, you are safely on the ground feeling wonderful, all fears forgotten.

In this example, most of your fear comes before the jump, because

of your imaginings of what might happen. Your fear is not about what is happening, but what might happen. It comes mostly from your imagination.

The jump could be dangerous. Parachuting is a dangerous sport and people are hurt and occasionally killed, so your fears are not groundless. However, you have the resources and the training and you believe it is possible to jump safely. Your values (raising money for charity and your pride) support you in going ahead. So while there is a small risk of danger, you believe you can handle it and you will be safe. The fear comes from your imagining of worst-case scenarios.

As you jump, the feeling is an adrenaline rush of excitement that is sometimes difficult to separate from fear. (If you pulled the release cord as you fell and the parachute did not open, then you would experience strong, authentic fear in that moment!)