

# GUTS OVER FEAR



Our emotions and expressions are not only a reflection of our inner thinking, but also act as an essential complement to the words we use when expressing ourselves. Fear, one of our most authentic emotions, is capable of serving a positive purpose in protecting us from danger, but can also be extremely debilitating. Psychologically, fear has the potential to hold us captive, enslaved, and paralyzed.

**By Mira Khreino**



**T**he expression of emotions is very culturally relative, yet research has identified six facial expressions corresponding to universal human emotions.

These emotions are sadness, anger, disgust, surprise, happiness, and fear. When presented with a picture demonstrating one of these expressions, the expression was internationally recognized and not mistaken for another. This shows that these emotional expressions are innate and part and parcel of being human, regardless of culture.

Essentially, fear is the emotional response to danger, whether real or perceived. The underlying feeling is that “everything is not going to be all right” or that something bad will happen. We all go through experiences that impact our lives in some way, whether be it our health, our financial stability, or our emotional wellbeing. We interpret and analyze these experiences and, if deemed negative, we develop an adverse reaction to the causing event or stimulus. This results in us developing an aversion or fear, perpetuated and sustained anytime we think about the negative impact we experienced. Whilst in the grip of this strong emotion, we can seldom think rationally; therefore, the way we process the fear is skewed. We not only develop fears from our own experiences, but we also create fears built on the negative experiences of others.

**“We not only develop fears from our own experiences, but we also create fears built on the negative experiences of others”**

### OUR GREATEST FEARS

- A **fear of failure** can very often stop us from starting a new project or a new venture. It may play on our minds, making us lack faith in our own ability and competence. A fear of failure may also prevent us from enjoying the excitement of a new undertaking, and instead shift our focus to the “what ifs” of not succeeding. This lowers self-confidence and hinders our chance of success.
- A **fear of rejection** manifests in our romantic lives in one of two ways. Either we avoid getting into situations where we feel we might be rejected (e.g. we do not approach someone we fancy in the fear that they might not feel the same), or in a type of self-sabotage, we ourselves reject someone we admire before they get a chance to reject us. Fear of rejection reflects

the way we feel about ourselves. While some may not take romantic rejection personally, others may be devastated by it. In this case, self-worth and self-esteem are influential factors in the formation and perpetuation of the fear of rejection.

- A **fear of certain objects, animals, or activities** – including phobias such as the fear of snakes and spiders, flying or heights, or crowded or enclosed spaces – are quite common. These fears are often irrational or disproportionate to the actual danger the stimulus poses. In very severe cases, one’s life can feel interrupted by, and even revolve around, the avoidance of a fearful stimulus. A simple example would be a man with a fear of bridges taking a much longer, traffic-laden route to work to avoid crossing a bridge on the shorter, clear route.





Many psychotherapist chairs have been privy to conversations about **fear of the unknown** and **fear of death**. Though we all know that death is inevitable and knowledge of the future impossible, there is a marked struggle for many surrounding both topics. When analyzed, the undercurrent of a large proportion of these conversations was the “fear of life” and the need to exert control over one’s surroundings. Avoiding sitting still and an aversion to introspection (sometimes coupled with the use of illicit drugs and alcohol) indicate a form of disconnection from life and a refusal to embrace its nature. Fearing the unknown can also manifest in over-planning one’s own schedule, leaving no leeway for life’s surprises, or wanting to manipulate other people’s behavior and scripting the way others ought to think and act.



## “Self-worth and self-esteem are influential factors in the formation and perpetuation of the fear of rejection”

### AN END TO THE NIGHTMARE

The four most common ways of coping with fear include avoidance, excessive worrying, keeping busy, and “spacing out.” Interestingly, these defenses are usually the same defenses used for other unpleasant feelings, such as grief. Unfortunately, even though temporarily functional, these coping methods actually prevent us from dealing with the cause of the fear; they delay us from dealing with the unpleasantness we are experiencing, postponing our overall freedom from it.

Some strong fears can take a foreground in our life, claiming a constant space in our minds. Unfortunately, this fixation will quite often reinforce a fear instead of solving it. Viewing the fear as bad can also strengthen it, as that causes us to either avoid experiencing the feeling all together, or chastise ourselves for experiencing it in the first place. Both lead to an unhealthy relationship with the fear and neither help us approach it. Changing the relationship we have with our fears, making it more accessible, can be a first mediatory step to becoming free from it.

This simple technique has been shown

to be effective in the cases of many fears. It can be broken down into a few easy to follow steps:

- 1) Think of or imagine your fear.
- 2) Try to keep the fear-inducing thought in your mind.
- 3) Acknowledge the way it makes you feel.
- 4) Start breathing slowly, deeply, and fully.
- 5) Try not to push the fear away. Keep it in your mind.
- 6) Take more extended breaths.
- 7) Focus the mind on the breath, with slow full inhales and long calming exhales.

We often become stuck on set patterns of thinking and consequent behavior, fixing our neural pathways in a specific way in the brain. However, these fixed pathways can be reset by making new associations. The constant repetition of coupling fearful stimulus with calm breath and body will gradually change the neural wiring, hence changing the association of a fearful stimulus with panic. The repetition of the above-mentioned technique may, with time, enable us to maintain a calm mind whilst thinking of that which would usually have induced anxiety.



## **"Fears and phobias are often irrational or disproportionate to the actual danger the stimulus poses"**

### **TREATING THE TERRIFIED**

Because fear is often future-directed, therapies and techniques that help people to focus on the present are instrumental as treatment methods. Meditation and breathing techniques have helped many people conquer and better manage their fears. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) teaches the patient to purposefully focus on the here and now, with a heightened awareness of the sensations in the body (body scanning), concentration on calm and deep breathing, sitting meditation practices, and mindful movement. These techniques, with the guidance of a trained mental health professional, can help

reduce fear anxiety and train the patient to become more present. No one wants to feel rotten, so the most natural reaction to the discomfort of fear and fear anxiety is avoidance and escape. Unfortunately, this serves to propel and perpetuate the fear. And, even though fear is one of the most authentic feelings we have, we are rarely inquisitive about our fears. Facing our fears requires a great deal of honesty and courage. If we do not meet the fear head on and work with it patiently and persistently, it will always play a destructive part in our lives, informing specific decisions we make and sometimes even leading us to behave in ways that neither help us nor the people around us.

### **THE FEAR MECHANISM**

Our reaction to fear triggers the activation of our sympathetic nervous system; this is our fight or flight response. Symptoms of this system include a huge surge in energy due to increased adrenaline, physiological arousal, racing heart rate, faster breathing, and, in some cases, shaking, tunnel vision, and loss of hearing.

### **RE-ACHIEVING CALM**

- Stimulants activate the sympathetic response, therefore caffeine and sugar should be avoided.
- Arguments, loud spaces, and violent news on television or radio also activate our fight or flight reaction, and hence should be limited.
- If you recognize sympathetic symptoms, in order to counteract the effect, find a quiet place to lie down and to slow down the breath and heart rate.
- Taking a warm shower to relax the tense muscles of the body can be very helpful. Even better, take a warm bath, adding a few drops of lavender oil. ■