

Face your Fears



" The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Franklin D Roosevelt

" We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light."

Plato

" One of the greatest discoveries a man makes, one of his great surprises, is to find he can do what he was afraid he couldn't do."

Henry Ford

Fear is a universal emotion. For some our greatest fear may be spiders, blood or enclosed spaces. As children we may have been frightened of the dark, monsters or goblins and as we have grown we have become afraid of new things, such as public speaking, changing our lives or appearing ridiculous. In certain situations it is an entirely appropriate response to something threatening – if we are in the middle of a forest and faced with a growling bear then naturally we will feel very afraid. This gets our blood pumping and triggers us into survival mode so that we are better equipped to react and deal with the situation at hand. Fear is useful in that it teaches us caution and can help to protect us from unnecessary harm or pain. Yet there are times when it stands in the way of experiences that help us to grow and be more fulfilled. When fear becomes overwhelming it can be paralysing and debilitating. It is the little voice inside our head telling us not to learn a new skill or pitch our ideas as we might meet failure or disapproval. By allowing our fear to control us we may miss out on opportunities to flourish and travel a more rewarding and meaningful path.

As we approach National Stress Awareness Week it is a good time to reflect on what causes us fear and anxiety. This helpsheet will explore the role that fear plays in our lives and highlight the times when fear can be unhelpful and hold us back from achieving the things we yearn for. Fear itself is often the barrier to doing what you want to do in life. If there is anything in this helpsheet that you would like to discuss further please contact one of our trained therapists on the Adviceline.

Understanding Fear

When we experience fear or feel threatened a number of things happen physiologically. Adrenaline is released and directed to the skeletal muscles to prepare for possible action, such as running or fighting. If this happens very quickly we can feel faint, go numb or freeze. Breathing speeds up and heart rate increases. Your pupils dilate. The fear response is almost entirely automatic. It is the same primitive response that we relied on when we were faced with wild animals and natural dangers; today our fears are more likely to be associated with walking down a dark alley, or preparing to meet an intimidating client, and yet the response is the same. Some frightening experiences such as car accidents, combat or personal tragedies can be very traumatic and overwhelm our ability to cope. If these experiences are very profound, or we do not have sufficient support to recover, we may continue to feel affected for some time. In these cases it can be helpful to seek professional help or advice.

As children we are repeatedly primed to be fearful. Parents are often overheard telling their children to 'be careful' but they are rarely ever heard telling children to 'take a risk today'. Understandably parents act on their innate desire to protect their children, but the message that children often internalise is to 'watch out because the world is a dangerous place'. As adults we need greater awareness and a willingness to change if we wish to overcome these deeply held beliefs. Writer of bestseller *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, Susan Jeffers, suggests there are 3 levels of fear:

Level 1: Exterior situations

These can be divided into Things that happen such as war, epidemics such as the Ebola crisis or job loss; & Actions like taking an exam, chairing a meeting, climbing a mountain etc.

Level 2: Ego related

These fears relate to how we perceive ourselves and may include fear of rejection, fear of success, having a child, losing weight etc.

Level 3: I can't handle it

Susan Jeffers believed that this one key belief was at the root of all fears, that if they were realised you would not be able to cope. It was her contention that if you could develop your belief in your ability to cope with whatever comes your way then you would be able to face your fears.



Making Fear Go Away

Many of us fall into the trap of the when/ then game: When I feel better I will do it – learn to drive, apply for a new role, write that novel or whatever your goal may be. Unfortunately this does not work. Ignoring your fear and avoiding it can even make it worse as it then gets mixed up with regret, poor self-esteem and low moods. Throughout our lives we are repeatedly confronted with fear, and this will continue for as long as we live.

The only way to get rid of the fear of doing something is to go out and do it. This is well recognised in the world of stage performance where a surprising number of actors have confessed to terrifying stage fright; Bill Nighy, Steven Fry, Judi Dench, Barry Humphries and many more. Laurence Olivier dubbed stage fright as 'the actor's nightmare'. Actor John Simm explains, the remedy is 'you just have to throw yourself on stage, that's the job.' They deal with the fear by facing it. Many argue that this anxiety and tension enhances performance as it adds a certain adrenaline and energy. Writer and Surfer, Laird Hamilton, describes how he uses the experience of fear: 'Forget your emotions around fear for a second and look at the simple reality: It's an energy source designed to increase performance.'



Tips for Facing Fear

Small steps can lead to big changes – Starting by facing your biggest fear may be a little daunting. Remember that a journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step. With each new challenge you face you grow and become more empowered. An early step could be saying no to somebody, attempting a new recipe or planning your day differently so that you have more time for the things that matter to you.

Accept what you can and cannot control – Fear often increases when we feel that things are beyond our control. In most situations there are things that you can control and things that you cannot. Knowing the difference is helpful. For instance as we are faced with the Ebola crisis most of us have limited control over how events unfold and this can be unsettling. Although we may not have direct influence over how things are handled on a global scale we can ensure that we access up to date advice and guidance on how to protect ourselves and ensure that we do not take unnecessary risks. We can make contributions by donating to organisations that provide support.



Breathe – our breath can be a great source of calm. Before you do something you are scared of take a few deep breaths, feel it go deep into your belly as your stomach rises and falls with each breath

Strike a power pose – by standing in a posture of confidence for as little as 2 minutes, even if we don't feel confident, we can positively affect our hormones by increasing levels of testosterone and lowering the stress hormone cortisol in the brain. These combine to help us to feel more empowered. A simple power pose involves standing with both arms reaching towards the sky, so that you have a feeling of expansiveness. You may not be able to do this in the middle of an interview or a meeting but taking some moments to do this as you prepare, even if you do this somewhere discreetly, can make a difference. For more information you can watch social psychologist, Amy Cuddy's inspiring and popular Ted Talk.

Identify the people in your life who hold you back – we all have people in our lives who continue to tell us to 'be careful', to avoid challenge or risk. It may be a partner who makes us feel we are not clever enough, or a friend who enjoys commiserating with you about your miserable careers. Notice when they say things that make you feel smaller and learn to filter these comments or spend less time with them. Find the people who celebrate your positive qualities and encourage you to reach your goals.

Pause – if you are feeling fearful take some time to think things through. Ask yourself if you need to leave the situation in order to protect yourself? Is it possible that unhelpful beliefs and thought patterns are being triggered and, in fact, you are capable of meeting the challenge that is frightening you.

Further Resources

Feel the fear and do it anyway, by Susan Jeffers

A Force of Nature: Mind, body, soul (and, of course, surfing) by Laird Hamilton

Ted Talk: Amy Cuddy – Your body language shapes who you are

Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations

www.well-online.co.uk

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline, providing emotional and practical support.

(This helpsheet is intended for informational purposes only and does not represent any form of clinical diagnosis. While every effort has been made to ensure that the content is accurate, relevant and current, CiC accepts no liability for any errors or omissions contained herein. The list of books is provided for interest only and CiC is not responsible for their availability, accuracy, or content.)

