
FACING ONE'S FEARS

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Fear can save one from doing something harmful, but it can also hold one back from doing things one likes and needs to do. In many psychiatric conditions fear and anxiety become a major problem in themselves. Identifying wants, needs and values together with better communication are effective ways to deal with harmful fears and anxieties.

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Introduction

Facing one's fears means acting, even if one feels anxious or fearful, to ultimately reduce fears that are a hindrance. These are fears that do not benefit or protect us, but interfere with our lived in a detrimental way. Fear is an emotion directed at a concrete situation, object or person, while anxiety is more like a heightened state of tension about uncertain events.

Both, fear and anxiety, provide important signals which can help the individual survive and prosper in challenging and potentially hostile situations. Fear prevents us from doing things that have a higher risk of inflicting harm on us, while anxiety is a powerful signal to change a situation. Unfortunately, many people have unlearned how to read these signals, and, more importantly, many have lost their faith in their ability to make changes in their environment and the enormous impact this can have. The result is the feeling of being stuck, helpless and hopeless, and little motivation towards change, which seems unreachable, and towards getting help.

Reasonable vs Unreasonable Fears

Our mind may tell us that a fear of tall buildings is unnecessary, but our emotions tell us otherwise. Some of these fears may be linked with experiences from one's own past, others with innate programs in our brain. Emotions have an evolutionary function to guarantee our survival by providing simple signals to induce action or stop an action. However, the brain circuits leading to fear, for example, are partly hardwired for specific information. A fear of heights on top of a tall building makes sense, because tall buildings have only been around for a fraction of human history. In earlier times, standing close to a precipice on a tall cliff or mountain was indeed a dangerous affair.

What is an 'unreasonable' fear? Emotions are neither good nor bad, reasonable or unreasonable, because they are not the outcome of a rational thought process. They are the product of massive integration of information at various neural and non-neural centres in the body, and as such they always 'make sense'. Whether we act or think reasonably or unreasonably as a consequence of the emotions is determined by how we process the emotion. Does one see the information relevant to oneself it contains, or not? Does one interpret this information in a helpful or unhelpful way? Does one act in a helpful or unhelpful way as a consequence of it? All this depends on what one makes of the emotion as information, and how one communicates with oneself and the world around.

Change

The brain processes information largely outside of any conscious thought or reflection, which is good because we could never process these masses of information if they needed to become conscious

first. But we can also consciously select information and teach our brain new ways of dealing with information, and to a degree which many people underestimate because it takes some time, effort and reflection, as well as a belief that this is useful, to get the necessary insight and put into motion the levers of change.

Values, Needs, Wants, Aspirations

The process of change requires taking a close look at one's basic values and fundamental interests, which ultimately drive any change. If one feels that something is important to oneself, it is easier to spend the necessary energy on figuring out a way to effect a change. Knowing why doing something is valuable and important to oneself is an important force in doing something even if one is fearful (as long as there is no real threat of harm from the activity). Many people have difficulties with motivation or the initiative to do things, but this is often less an issue of the immediate situation, but of not knowing what really makes one tick, the things that have the power to excite oneself, one's basic needs, interests, values and aspirations. Especially one's true values can be a very helpful guide for the long-term, since they usually do not change. Even after severe traumata, when they might seem to be altered, they are just covered up partially.

Focus on Oneself

In many cases, however, feeling pressure to go through with a feared activity can be counterproductive. As the need to take the elevator, for example, increases, the fear increases as well. The problem is that the activity is seen as a 'need' dictated by the outside world. Overcoming a fear should come from an internal need, the fulfilment of a basic value or fundamental interest.

Thoughts and Emotions

The thoughts and emotions we perceive arise in one interconnected system of nerve cells (neurons) and they are messages representing a set of information flowing from one location in the brain to another. If we do something, it should make sense but also feel good. Emotions are not as accessible to rationality because we are not conscious of the large amount of information that goes into them, a process that happens largely in our subconscious.

Relevance to Oneself

It is only worth facing one's fears where an action makes sense in the context of one's values and aspirations. This means using one's thoughts and feelings to find those things which make one happy and are enjoyable, as well as being in sync with one's values. This is a first important step in breaking down fears and developing the motivation and initiative to overcome them.

Communication and Fear

How we communicate with others has an influence of the fears we are experiencing. Meaningful helpful communication can reduce fears, if delivered with empathy and understanding, while negative communication or a lack of communication can increase fears. When we face those fears, communicating with someone else or others can be helpful in overcoming the fears.

Building the Motivation to Overcome One's Fears

Reconnecting with ourselves should allow us to identify our value and aspirations which can be very effective in building the motivation to overcome fears and even to reduce them. Doing something we feel strongly about might not reduce the nervousness we feel, but it can lower the amount of fear or even transform it into excitement. It is easier to overcome one's fears if one knows why this is beneficial to oneself and others.

Information Overload

In the complex world, we live in our brains can get overloaded with information, a situation that in itself can cause fears. So, an important first step is to untangle the web of complexity by picking out the information that is important to us. Being selective requires knowing what one wants and what one is looking for. This is why getting in touch with one's values can be so important. They tell us what is important to us and what we should be looking for. Openness is important to find new interests, make better decisions, formulate new plans and aspire to even greater things, but if we do things that

are not in sync with our core sense of ourselves as person and our basic values¹, there will be little happiness in these activities.

Ridding Oneself of the Irrelevant

Humans often spend too much resources on information that is not relevant to them or where they cannot change anything. If you cannot change an issue, there is not much sense in wasting mental or physical resources on it. In such a situation, it is more important to deal with your emotions, be they fears, sadness or anger. One way is to find a way to communicate them in a meaningful way. Communicating an emotion helps to resolve it. This could be in the form of talking about it, writing about it, or even making a movie about it.

Selecting Information

The way we select, process and manage information is important in alleviating fears. You may be anxious of something or of a situation, but maybe one reason is that you do not have enough information about it. We live in a world where information is very readily available, so informing oneself is often not that difficult. And if you do not find answers to a question you have, consider if you are asking the right question, one that is helpful to you.

The Question is Key

Often, we ask questions that do not really provide us direction or useful answers, so we get lost in ruminations and endless spirals of meaningless thought cascades. Try to split up a question, and see if you might not get at least partial answers to the component that is relevant, while leaving the irrelevant part unanswered.

¹ One's sense of self, one's personality and one's values usually change little over one's life span, except for exposure to extreme, and especially traumatic, experiences.

The Lasting Power of Values

Any information is helpful if it helps one live according to one's values and basic interests. Life is going along a path. You cannot know the entire path until you have lived your life, but your values provide a good compass and they help dispel fear whenever it pops up along the way.

Generalisation

Quite often fears generalize in what is called a 'generalised anxiety'. This can lead to a general fear of life itself. Here it is important to determine which emotions and specific fears are underlying the generalised anxiety.

Relevance to Oneself

A patient may identify something that triggered the anxiety, but the reasons for it can go back a long time. Dealing with some of the underlying issues may require identifying his or her values and interests. To identify what is relevant helps in disengaging from the thoughts and fears that are irrelevant to the person. Closely held values, needs, wants and aspirations make it easier to engage in constructive thoughts and to search for the information that will be useful to effect a change and make a difference that is of valuable to oneself.

Finding Answers without Questions

Generalised anxiety occurs often when people feel they need to fix something or find answers without knowing the question or to make decisions, when they do not know where to look for them, or even where to start. The best way to resolve this vicious cycle is by taking a step back, seeing the situations for what it is with its relevant and irrelevant components, and measuring one's options against what one truly need and want. Much in life is noise and irrelevant to one's path, merely a sideshow to the main event.

Communication to Counter Fear

It helps to be in contact with someone else to make the fears manageable. Facing fears with another make it easier to deal with fears and anxieties. The reason is that there can be valuable feedback with another, mostly unconscious. These connections we make also help distribute the sense of responsibility that can often be a major burden in the change process. The decision and initiative towards change is an individual event, but the flows of information with others make it a better informed and emotionally more tolerable journey.



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References

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