

Do I Manage My Fear, Or Does It Manage Me?

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Lately, I am noticing what seem to be higher fear levels than usual. Or perhaps I am just more aware of them. Either way it has prompted me to write about fear, which has long been an interest of mine. Being involved in health care for all these years I have had a great opportunity to observe how people deal with fear, as well as exploring my own response to fear.

Fear has a tremendous impact on health. I have observed this and experienced it over and over again. Many scientific studies in the health field confirm it. Extreme fear, if unrelieved for too long, can even lead to death!

We all know of instances where extreme fear or perhaps better called panic, has led to behaviors that cause disastrous outcomes.

I'm not sure how things are in other parts of the world, but here in the United States it seems that fear levels are unusually high. For several years, we have had a very challenging, and for many, frightening economic environment. Many people have lost their jobs; some have lost their life's savings; an unprecedented number of people have lost their homes. Still others are afraid these things will happen to them.

Besides this background of "perpetual" fear fueled by the economic climate, not to mention fears about terrorism, we have the recent and ongoing disaster in Japan.

Some of us in the United States live in earthquake zones and are worried that what happened in Japan could happen to us here. Some of us live along the coast and are afraid of tsunamis. Others of us live near nuclear power plants. (By the way, the U.S. plants are no safer than the Japanese ones. At least a few of the U.S. plants are sited right over active earthquake faults!)

The latest fear I see all around me is that of radiation from the nuclear disaster in Japan making its way to the U.S. west coast. Here is one indicator of just how strong and widespread this last fear is:

People have heard that taking potassium iodide is a good way to protect oneself against the airborne radiation typical of a nuclear accident. (There is some truth to this, but to use it safely and effectively there is a lot to know.) Within just a few hours of the news hitting the U.S. West Coast that at least one Japanese nuclear power plant was in trouble, ALL of the potassium iodide in West Coast stores was sold out!

I am very concerned that many of the people who were propelled by their fear to rush out and buy up all of the potassium iodide on the U.S. West Coast will harm themselves by taking it without learning how. This is a perfect example of being managed by one's fear, rather than managing the fear. The consequences could be disastrous.

So, is fear bad? No, I don't think so. I find myself wanting to yell, "Not so!" when I hear so-called experts in mental and emotional health describe fear as a "negative emotion". I don't buy that concept for a second.

I believe that fear is neither good nor bad. It is our response to our fear that can be either good or bad. But the fear itself is just an emotion that is present under various circumstances.

Not sure if fear is neutral? Consider that almost all that we observe in human beings is the result of the long process of evolutionary trial and error. Most, if not all, of the general characteristics of human beings are essential to survival.

Many years ago I attended a fire walking event. I have done lots of scary things in my life. I love radical roller coasters; have a long history of participating in extreme sports, and generally like pushing myself up against my fears. I had long wanted to try fire walking. About 35 years ago I attended a fire-walking ceremony. When my turn came, my fear was too strong and I could not make myself do it. Was my fear bad? Was it a negative emotion? I don't think so. I think it was protecting me from doing something I was simply not ready to do. (To this day I have not fire walked.)

Fear is a warning that we need to pay attention to something. You would never say that the engine coolant temperature gauge in your car was a bad thing, would you? You would not accuse it of being negative – of course not. Imagine what would happen if you decided that the warning your engine coolant temperature gauge was giving you was negative information that you should ignore or "block out". You'd soon have a very expensive repair bill and maybe a big towing bill, as well.

Yet, we have "gurus" of emotional health, motivational coaches and many others trying to convince us that fear is bad and that we should neither acknowledge it nor engage with it. This strategy of "no fear" seems even more ridiculous when you stop to think that in all likelihood there is no way to prevent fear, anyway. Fear seems to be a "primordial response" that will occur, whether we want it or not.

I remember reading Frank Herbert's "Dune" when it was first published. A part of the book I have never forgotten is how the hero, Paul, was trained to deal with fear. He was taught something called: "The Litany Against Fear". It was a sort of prayer/meditation aimed at eliminating fear. Here's how it went:

***I must not fear.
Fear is the mind-killer.
Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.
I will face my fear.
I will permit it to pass over me and through me.
And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.
Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.
Only I will remain.***

I was very impressed with this and began to use it in my everyday life. I would chant it out loud whenever I found myself in a fearful situation. But before long, I realized that there was a part of this prayer that did not quite work for me.

The first line in the original reads: ***"I must not fear"***. That seeks to deny fear, which I think is not possible, nor would it be healthy if it were possible. So I changed the first line to read: ***"I do not give my power unto fear."*** That seems to work perfectly, and I use this little prayer to this day.

Fear is the means by which our unconscious mind, whose number one priority is our safety, employs to get our attention. It uses fear to let us know that we need to respond to something. In their efforts to keep us safe, our unconscious minds will use whatever means may be required to obtain our attention.

Some fears warrant an immediate response without taking time to examine them and to thoughtfully determine the best response. You step into the cross walk and suddenly a car runs the light. You had better jump back onto the sidewalk right away. There is no time to think about what to do. The response you hope for is almost like the acute pain response that by unthinking reflex causes you to jerk your hand away from a hot stove.

But in many cases, particularly in our complex and many-layered modern lifestyle, we experience fears that it would be best for us to respond to in a much more measured way. We would get better results if we could think about our response before acting.

But denial of fear is neither healthy nor really possible. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the fear is there. So acknowledge the fear. Remember, fear is not bad. It is NOT a negative emotion. It is just an emotion that has a purpose – letting us know that there is something involving our safety that requires our attention.

Even if the response may be just to acknowledge the fear, we must start by noticing the fear and admitting it, at least to ourselves. Then we might say, "This is a fear of something that is not truly a threat. I am feeling this fear because... But there is no action I need take because the threat is not real." Repressing the fear, denying it or ignoring it will not do.

These “notice and acknowledge, only” fears are like a fire drill – we acknowledge that the alarm has gone off. We quickly determine that there is no real fire. So we do not need to turn on the ceiling sprinklers or fire hoses, which would unnecessarily damage the building.

In other cases the fear may be warning us of something that is a real threat. Perhaps we are walking somewhere at night, and as we pass the entrance to a dark alley the hairs stand up on the backs of our necks. This could be the result of watching too many scary movies, or it could be left over trauma from a previous experience. Or it could be that our subconscious has detected a movement in the alley that our conscious may not be aware of. The subconscious mind causes the hairs to stand up to get our attention and let us know of a possible threat.

So what is a healthy response to fear? I’m not talking about the obvious fears around immediate threats, like getting out of the way of a skidding car. I’m talking about things like watching a potentially frightening news cast, or perhaps getting a bill in the mail that we did not expect and have not budgeted for.

Different experts give us different advice. Many tell us to “not fear”. I disagree. Instead, here’s my map for dealing with fear:

1. Acknowledge the fear. Feel it.
2. Determine the cause. Sometimes a simple question such as, “What is it that I am feeling afraid of?” will help. The answer often surprises me.
3. Confirm it. Is this really the primary fear? Or is this a surface fear that is on top of a more basic fear. For example, fear of running out of money sounds like a basic fear. But in my model it is not. Fear of running out of money is on top of the more basic fear of not having food or shelter. It always helps to identify the basic or primary fear.
4. When I am sure that I have fully identified the fear I like to assign an intensity number to the fear. I use a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 is no fear and 10 is abject terror.
5. Next I grab my tools for dealing with challenging emotions and go to work. My goal is to turn down the emotional charge, so that I can safely evaluate the fear, examine its cause, and determine my best response.

My current favorite tool is the “Emotional Freedom Technique”, or “EFT”. I use this tool to remove as much of the panic as I can and to turn off the internal “screaming siren” so that I can more calmly explore my options and formulate my plan of action.

Here’s a real-life example: I was recently involved in a civil court case that went on for some time. In representing myself I was badly out-gunned by the other side’s superior legal resources.

The first few times I had to appear in court to argue my case I was in an absolute panic. I would say my fear level was at a 9!

In fact, for my first appearance I was so scared that I forgot to use the wonderful tools I had at my disposal. I left the courtroom dazed. But as soon as I was in a private enough space, I recited my version of "The Litany Against Fear" several times. (I used my modified version, of course.) That brought it down to about an 8 or maybe 7 ½.

Then I went to work using EFT to get the emotional charge down to about a 2. That was manageable, and it gave me enough peace of mind and focus to begin thinking clearly again.

From that point forward, I used The Litany Against Fear and EFT to prepare for each appearance. What a difference that made! Appearing in court, knowing that the attorney on the other side had more than 30 years of experience practicing law was still intimidating. But through use of the tools, I kept my fear in the manageable range. I'm sure I would have experienced much more extended, and potentially health-damaging stress had I not used the available tools deal with the fear.

There are many tools and techniques for dealing with fear. In case you are looking for one, I encourage you to check out EFT. I find it elegant, efficient, easy to learn and simple to practice. There are a number of on-line resources to help you get started. Here is just one of many:

<http://www.thetappingsolution.com/how-to-tap.php>

Please feel free to send your questions or comments to: jeff@myhealthoptimizer.com

To your great health!

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