

How Fear Warps Your Thinking—and 3 Ways You Can Fight Back

Why fear is the biggest threat to your success

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A tall, wobbly ladder—and you at the top.
A black spider with eight hairy, spidery legs.
A clown—any clown.

Fear *can* be a great survival tool. But as a way of life? It has some nasty side effects.

In every stressful or threatening situation, your brain starts logging details and adding warning labels. You may not notice at the time—you're too busy dealing with the situation—but later, whenever you encounter one similar detail to that threatening situation, you'll find yourself with sweaty palms and a racing heart. Once triggered, fear manifests in one of two primary ways: as a continual low-level fear or as a high-level, intense fear.

Anxiety is the low-level, everyday, garden-variety type of fear. It's an alertness to potential danger rather than a response to present danger. When you're anxious, your brain releases stress hormones and shuffles your priorities. Instead of focusing intently on one thing, you go into a vigilant scanning mode.

This is really useful if, say, you're on the savanna and need to notice that clump of bushes swaying before the lion jumps out. It's not so useful if the anxiety is triggered by deadlines, strained relationships, financial pressure or an overloaded inbox. In those cases, hyper-alert mode keeps you from concentrating, which is precisely what you must do to solve those anxiety-inducing problems.

The full fear response is intense, usually short-lived, and has profound effects on your body and mind. The first major effect is energy redirection. When fear kicks in, survival—rather than health—becomes paramount. Your brain reroutes energy to necessary survival skills, like eyesight and muscle response. Other functions, such as your digestive system, get put on hold.

Fear also redirects your thinking. Normally, sensory inputs take a long, leisurely route through your prefrontal cortex, where they are evaluated. Logical, abstract moral, and creative thinking all happen here. Fear gives your sensory inputs a short-cut, straight to your emotional, instinctive center: the amygdala. Here you get quick, concrete, reactive, specific thinking and emotionally or instinctively-driven decisions.

You can probably see how emotionally driven decisions might not be helpful when the fear you face is, say, an angry boss or an unhappy spouse.

Fortunately, there are some actions you can take to keep fear from controlling how you think. Here are three:

1. Recognize fear with body check-ins.

Perform a simple, hourly body check-in by asking yourself, *What am I feeling right now?* and then scanning your body, head to toes. When you find something off, such as strained vision, tense shoulders, heartburn or shallow breathing, ask yourself, *Why am I feeling this right now?* If you can identify the source of the fear, you can then face it consciously and determine if it is a real threat or not.

2. Reduce fear with buffers.

Everyday situations can cause unending anxiety that literally disables your brain from doing concentrated, creative work. Ease your anxiety by building buffer into your work and personal life. Set up soft deadlines a few days before the real deadlines. Add transition time between meetings, clients or events. Schedule extra commute time. As much as you can, space out your obligations and projects so your brain can relax and do its work well.

3. Face fear with controlled experiences.

For defined triggers, those distinct fears you know you have, you can slowly train yourself to handle them better. Nothing extreme; just decide on a simple action you'll take instead of freezing the next time you encounter the trigger. Freezing is the body's initial, automatic response. When you force yourself to take a different action instead, you slowly retrain your brain to respond to that particular fear in a different (more productive) way. Over time your brain learns that this trigger is not an unpredictable danger, but a manageable, if unpleasant, situation that you can handle.

Being unaware of fear can keep us locked into it. But when you know what fear feels like, looks like and does to your brain, you can start taking control.

A little stress is good, too much stress is bad, and understanding it can be everything. There's no escaping everyday anxiety, so learn how to harness it.