

How to Manage Our Feelings of Fear

By

Jay Uhler

Breathe! People usually hold their breath when they are afraid. Our bodies get tense, our muscles constrict which constricts our blood vessels and our bodies to not get the oxygen it needs. **So, Breathe, again.** Doesn't that feel good?

If you ever watch a high diver standing on the board before he dives, he stops and takes some deep breaths. Smart move.

Let us consider the emotion of fear. First, we need to acknowledge that all emotions are energy that either sits or moves through our body, depending on what we do with it. If we block it, it sits there and causes stress to our body, which will eventually cause illness or physical pain. If we move it out of our bodies, it is released and we can relax. If we take action without choosing our actions with the full knowledge of where the emotion is coming from, we cause relationship and social problems for ourselves and those around us. The wise approach is to understand our emotions. Our focus now is on the emotion of fear.

Fear does not predict the future; it only tells you that you are afraid. Experiencing your fear only lets you know that you are feeling fear. The trick is to recognize the emotion of fear when it emerges, accept it, discover its source and decide what to do with it.

When we do not recognize and manage our fear, it controls us and therefore creates problems. Some people do not recognize when they have fear. When fear occurs, they experience anger instead. Anger may be perceived as a protection against whatever is feared. To experience fear can seem too vulnerable or not manly.

On occasion, anger may be self-protective. However, it usually brings attack, so is not protective. When we express anger in an aggressive manner, it brings more fear and pain when the other person retaliates because of their fear of being hurt.

When we are willing to face the discomfort of fear, we have the possibility to control it. Awareness can lead to acceptance, which leads to self-control.

When we refuse to accept our fear, or even worse, judge ourselves for having the feeling, we are creating the potential for self-rejection. Self-rejection is for me the worst form of pain I know. If other people reject me and I don't reject myself, it is their problem. If I reject myself because they reject me, that is my problem—big time.

If I am kind to myself and accept my fear for what it is—a feeling—then I have the opportunity to ask it what messages it has for me.

Our fear may be coming from **past** experiences, especially our earliest family. It may be related to the **present** situation. It may be related to the **future**.

(This article was written for listeners to the Jordan Rich Show, WBZ, 1030AM, Boston, when we discussed "Moving Through Fear" on October 16, 2005. Share your thoughts by e-mail at radiospots@aol.com or mail them to Jordan Rich, c/o WBZ, 1170 Soldiers Field Rd., Boston, MA 02134.)

What is the number one fear? Research shows that the number one fear for many people is the fear of public speaking, so let us use the example of public speaking as an analogy of how to relate fear and its source, past, present or future.

It may seem strange to use public speaking as the example, since most people don't do it, however, that is a good reason. We can stand back and look at it more objectively than an emotion packed example that is loaded with bias.

Is our fear from the past because we have been told that children should be seen and not heard? Where you told, "Keep your mouth shut so you don't show how stupid you are." If we are going to be speaking to a friendly audience, then our fear is related to the past.

If we are speaking to a hostile audience and we have been encourage and loved by people in the past, by family, teachers and friends, then our fear is related to the present. We can then focus on how to be gracious under attack. That sends a positive message, sometimes more important than the information we present.

I have been asked to speak on subjects that are on the fringe of my knowledge, but I am not an expert on the topic (if I ever am). The planners wanted me and they wanted the topic. If we are asked to speak about a subject about which we are not an expert, our fear may be warning us to do some serious preparation and to research the subject.

Life is a whole lot easier when we take the time to discover why we are afraid and where it is coming from.

My belief is that the most frequent fear is the fear of pain. Most of our fear is related to past painful or frightening experiences that we bring into the present or project into the future.

Let's consider some examples. The fear of public speaking is related to the fear that we will make a mistake, which will be embarrassing, which is painful. The reason is that we have had painful experiences in the past.

The fear of the death of a person we love is fear of the pain we will experience related to the ways we depend on the person, which will no longer be a part of our life after they are gone. Fear of changing jobs is a fear that we will not do it well and loose it, the fear of the unknown people who we will work with. Our fear is the anticipation of pain related to whatever is the focus of our fear.

Let us consider the possibility that fear does predict the future. When we are afraid, we relate to the world around us differently that when we feel safe or when we are happy without fear. People and animals will pick up our fear. Animals and some humans can smell fear. When we are afraid, we may emit an odor from our body.

When we are afraid, we will interact differently than when we are relaxed with a person or in a situation. When we are afraid, we may not think as clearly or speak as clearly as when we are happy.

We may influence future outcomes when we are afraid, depending on how we handle our fear. Once I was in a situation in which I was quite frightened. I told the person I was meeting with that if I appeared angry, it was not anger. I told him that I had no reason to be angry at him, then explained that sometimes when I am afraid, I look

angry. I let him know that I was afraid. He was wonderfully compassionate and kind. We were able to address the situation with a positive relationship and positive results.

At other times, allowing myself to be vulnerable has resulted in being hurt when I expressed my feelings. We must be selective with whom we open ourselves. Unfortunately, some people are mean.

So, if fear does not predict the future, yet fear may influence the future, how do we know the difference?

Self-awareness is crucial. The more we know about ourselves, the more we can discover where our fear is coming from—our past, the present or the future. The better we know ourselves, the more we can manage our fear in stressful situations. The more we can sense a situation from an inner awareness, the better we can deal with it. The more we know about our insides, the more effectively we can relate to the outside. The more confident we are about ourselves, which grows from self-awareness, the safer we will be in the world around us. The safer people are in our presence, the more relaxed and kind they will be with us.

The best way to manage fear is to focus on the present moment. Most often fear is the anticipation of pain. If we focus on past events, often we focus on negative frightening or painful experiences. The only way to deal with them is to release the emotions in them and let them go. We cannot be in the future. It is not here yet. When we focus on the present, we eliminate a lot of fear and pain and fear of pain.

Often when we are in fear, anticipating pain, we are not in pain. We have much to be happy about and grateful for. When we are in pain or frightened a frightening situation in the present moment, we can address the pain or the situation, manage it and move through it.

There are times when we are afraid that we need comfort, support or clarity from another person. In those times, we need to reach out to kind, caring, compassionate people in our lives and share our fears. This can help to get them in perspective.

Sometimes when we are in a frightening situation, we need a protector. Again, we need to reach out to those whom we can trust.

Most reliable is to be centered in our selves, trusting our instincts. I was mugged in Cambridge. The mugger had his arm around my neck and said he had a knife in my back. It seemed true. Fortunately, I sensed that the man would only hurt me if I resisted. I relaxed, so did he. He ran off with my wallet and a few dollars. Most important, he was gentle with me because he sensed that I would do nothing to hurt him. Was I afraid? Yes! Did I trust my instincts about the situation? Yes!

Would I have fought for all I am worth if I needed to protect one of my children or myself? Yes! I am fortunate that I am not often in situation where I must fight. When I am in situations where other people would choose to fight, I find other ways to deal with it.

Fear does not predict the future. It only tells us that we are afraid. How we move through our fear and manage it influences our future.

Make friends with your fear. It has messages for you that are important in making decisions about how to run your life. Manage your fear well and you may make enemies into friends. It is well worth the effort.

(For more on the subject of fear in greater depth, go to the chapter entitled "Fear" in the book, *How to Make Friends With Your Feelings* by Jay Uhler.)

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