

TURNING FEAR AROUND

FEAR CAN PARALYZE, BUT IT CAN ALSO ENERGIZE US TOWARD GROWTH AND CHANGE. LEARN HOW TO USE THIS POWERFUL EMOTION AS A CATALYST FOR COURAGEOUS ACTION.

By CAT THOMPSON

Everywhere we look these days, we are flooded with reasons to be afraid. There's worry about terror alerts and global warming; anxiety over getting old or going broke; and the grinding, chronic fear of contracting cancer or some other dreaded disease. And as if that weren't enough, we also have reality television shows such as *Fear Factor* and *Survivor*, which feed on our fascination with paranoia, anxiety and fear.

Being in a continual state of fear and tension can have a profound impact on our health and well-being. The emotional stress weakens our immune system and puts us at greater risk for conditions such as high blood pressure. The other problem with experiencing too much constant, low-grade fear is that it can distract us from fear's inherent gifts.

Yes, fear has gifts. Its first purpose is to keep us safe, telling us when we should move out of harm's way. Once we are out of immediate danger, our fear provides us with the basis for deeper analysis and evaluation, the fruits of which might be discovery, growth or motivation for change.

Fear of losing our job, for example, might spur us to perform better and become more valuable to our employer. Worries about our health might motivate us to eat better or work out regularly. Fear of losing a cherished possession can motivate us to become more responsible about monitoring and maintaining it. Motivation is one example of how, when we look at the things we fear, we may find a path of courage unfolding — the courage to take action because of our fear, or at least in the face of it. In fact, I believe that fear is really courage in disguise.

Above all, fear governs change. Handled properly, it supplies energy for actions that will help us evolve and move toward our goals.

FEAR FACTORS

As reality shows demonstrate, we are attracted to things that scare us a little. Up to a certain point, fear can cause delicious sensations in the body. When we are in a highly charged emotional state (whether afraid or ecstatic), certain areas of the brain begin firing simultaneously, putting us in a state of acute mental clarity. In fearful situations, we are fully present in our body, on high alert and completely alive. At the height of fear, we can assess a situation and move into action in a split second. Risk takers, such as bungee jumpers and white-water rafters, relish this heightened state of awareness and seek it out.

It makes sense that we would be drawn to situations that supercharge us. Consciously facing down a specific fear can yield a lot of confidence that we can then summon to help us move closer to our goals and, ultimately, joy. But chronic fear is different. If fear becomes a dominant, entrenched, everyday emotional pattern, it pulls us off course, drains our power and often leads to inaction that borders on paralysis. When we give fear this power to halt our momentum, it blunts our potential. Left unchecked, a pattern of uninterrupted fear can cripple our capacity for change and our ability to enjoy a full and satisfying life.

The solution? Get intimate with your fear. Examine how it affects you and how you tend to respond to it. Do this especially when you feel fear paralyzing you. Use its message to motivate you to inspired action. Read on to learn how.



Recognize fear's gifts: Fear's main purpose is to keep you safe. Very often, it's a signal that you should remove yourself from immediate danger and give yourself enough time and space to evaluate the situation and develop a proper course of action. But it's not a license to procrastinate, repress or avoid indefinitely. If you forever avoid and fail to investigate your fears, you'll leave on the table much of what you, and your life, have to offer.

Get more information. One of fear's most fundamental messages is "Halt! You don't have enough information to proceed safely." Fear puts its foot down and demands that you bring back more data before deciding to act. By providing ourselves with information, even if we don't know exactly how things may go, we have a more solid framework for action.

For example, if you are a first-time homebuyer, you may be dreading the process of seeking a mortgage. Instead of letting fear freeze you, use the uncomfortable feeling as a reminder to ask yourself, "Do I have the information I need?" If the answer is no, start gathering. As you begin collecting books, Web sites, and information from realtors, you may feel your apprehension about the situation turn into excitement and anticipation.

Imagine more possibilities. Fear sharpens our senses and (if we let it) can also fuel our imagination. Whenever we contemplate taking any risky action, we tend to spend a lot of time running "what ifs" through our heads. Unfortunately, we often only imagine the very worst. It's OK to play these "What's the worst that could happen?" games as a way of releasing our emotional energy, or realizing that some of our most-feared outcomes are largely unlikely. But it's equally important to envision positive outcomes, and to use these positive scenarios as guiding visions.

Let's say you are stuck in your career but too fearful to make a change. Allow yourself to feel the surge of fear as you run through your worst-case scenarios, then consciously begin to divert that flow of mental and emotional energy into a new channel, one defined by positive imagination and vision.

You might imagine yourself being successful in a wide variety of completely different jobs — part-time, full-time, near, far, comfortable and risky. As you run through these scenarios, identify which outcomes are most energizing and hold the most promise. Then begin directing all your emotional energy toward constructing your new vision.

Get creative. If life were totally predictable, we might never examine new and different ways to solve problems or make changes. Although we may be afraid when things change, we may also unconsciously create fearful situations as a way of moving ourselves forward and achieving growth.

People naturally tend to get stuck in ruts. But add some adrenaline — in the form of an emergency, a deadline or a possible negative outcome — and suddenly there's a new urgency to be creative and to explore original solutions. Putting ourselves in a risky situation can spark new insight, new conviction and new passion, which can then ignite the courage we need to take the risk.

Remember, courage is not the absence of fear; it is action in the face of fear. So when you find yourself unable to commit to an action, or make a change because of fear, remember to gather up fear's gifts. A friend recently shared with me an old quote from actress Dorothy Bernard. She said: "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." To that I say, Amen! ●

Cat Thompson writes regularly for *Experience Life*. Learn more about her work at www.emotionaltechnologies.com.

WIPE OUT Worry

HERE ARE THREE SUGGESTIONS FOR
CHANGING YOUR FEAR INTO COURAGE:

LISTEN TO YOUR FEARS: Although it's wise to examine our fears, starting with the phrase "I'm afraid that ..." may not get us very far. First, we may not be willing to identify so closely with our fears. Second, following the statement "I am" with a negative word like "afraid" is likely to be self-fulfilling. Instead, try letting your fears voice themselves directly, using the preamble, "My fear says" You may be surprised by how much more information you glean.

WEIGH THE BENEFITS: Consider exactly what you hope to gain from the scary experience and weigh all the potential benefits (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual) against any potential liabilities in those areas. Knowing precisely what you stand to gain can provide the boost you need to overcome fear.

On the other hand, realizing that there are prohibitive potential costs might cause you to revise the risk you are entertaining, or to take precautions. Ask yourself:

1. What are my reasons for choosing or rejecting this course of action?
2. How many of those reasons are unexamined fears? Which are related to simple resistance to change, and which are related to real, important dangers?
3. What could I do to minimize or satisfy my fears (get more information, take steps toward safety, have a contingency plan, etc.)?

SEEK SAFETY. Take precautionary steps that will allow you to feel more secure. For example, if you want to travel to a foreign country but are afraid of being sick overseas, take actions to buoy your confidence: Talk to your doctor about advance inoculations and medicines to carry with you; build your immunity with exercise and diet before leaving; check that your hotel is safe and comfortable; read up on food-and-water-safety precautions for the region you plan to visit, etc. Then, imagine the best possible outcome of that trip and go on it, armed with your supplies, your trust and your feeling of security. Your fear may still be present, but it will no longer be the leading factor in your final decision.

