

Facing Your Fears

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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.

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.

Change

The brain processes information, and fortunately we can consciously select information and teach our brain new ways of dealing with information. But this requires taking a close look at our basic values and fundamental interests, which ultimately drive any change. If you feel that something is important to you, you are more likely to spend 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).

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.

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.

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.

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,

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.

and see if you might not get at least partial answers to the component that is relevant, while leaving the irrelevant part unanswered.

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.

You 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 your values and interests. You want to cut down on thoughts and fears that are irrelevant to you, and focus constructively on the issue that are relevant to you by finding helpful information.

Generalised anxiety occurs often when people feel they have to fix something or find answers or make decisions, when they do not know where to look for them, or even where to start. Take a step back, see the situations for what it is with its relevant and irrelevant components, and measure your options against what you truly need and want. Much in life is noise and irrelevant to one's path.

Communication to Counter Fear

It helps to be in contact with someone else to make the fears manageable. Facing fears with another may make it easier to deal with your fears and anxieties because you know you do not have to face them alone. When you talk to your neighbour on an airplane, for example, you might not even notice the take-off, and the brief interaction with the stranger reduces the emotional pressure on the inside.

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