



►► **PAYING ATTENTION TO FEAR AND ITS CONCOMITANT EMOTIONS HELPS US INCREASE OUR CHANCES OF SURVIVING AND THRIVING. FEAR IS OUR BODY'S NATURAL WARNING SYSTEM. WE DO OURSELVES A DISSERVICE WHEN WE IGNORE IT.**



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Walking Into the Lion's Den

Understanding our fears begins with facing them.

I have learned over the years that when one's mind is made up, this diminishes fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear.

—Rosa Parks, with Gregory J. Reed, "Quiet Strength: The Faith, the Hope, and the Heart of a Woman Who Changed a Nation."

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF? You may have been asked this question by someone who was trying to diminish or shame you for being afraid. Hopefully, you've been asked this by someone who wanted to help and support you. We all have fears. For most of us there is a whole list. Some fears are with us frequently. Others are related to a particular situation we may find ourselves in. Feeling afraid is a natural emotion that helps keep us safe. Fear prepares us physiologically and psychologically to avoid pain and learn from our mistakes. Fear can improve our chances of survival by making us more alert and triggering adaptive responses. Fear, when it becomes overwhelming, negatively affects our functioning. But this can be mitigated by certain actions we will look at below.

Our natural warning system

Benefitting from our fear and managing it when it becomes overwhelming requires acknowledging and addressing this difficult emotion. It helps to understand that fear may be accompanied by anger, frustration, confusion, terror, or even excitement. Paying attention to fear and its concomitant emotions helps us increase our chances of surviving and thriving. Fear is our body's natural warning system. We do ourselves a disservice when we ignore it.

Recognizing the nature and scope of fear can help us manage it for our benefit. Eva Holland in her book, "Nerve: Adventures in the Science of Fear," breaks fear down into three useful categories: phobias, trauma, and existential. Phobias are seemingly irrational fears connected to things in the world, e.g. fear of heights, snakes, and flying. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 12.5 percent of adults in the U.S. will experience a phobia at some point in their lives. Some lawyers have a phobia about public speaking, which may complicate their lives. Not all phobias need to be addressed, but if a phobia is negatively affecting our functioning there are interventions that can help.

Trauma involves fear-filled memories and fears of the future. Holland describes being in a traumatic car accident that left her with very bad memories. It also made her fearful of being in a moving car. There is a whole range of intensity of traumatic events, which impact our ability to function in the world and feel all right. Lawyers often experience their clients' fear vicariously, which leads to trauma for the lawyer.

Existential fears involve fears of our own death or of someone close to us, of other significant losses, or of uncertainties about the world and our place in it. Loss of or dissatisfaction with a job can provoke these kinds of fears for lawyers, whose identities are strongly tied to their careers. Current world affairs, wars, political conflicts and uncertainties, controversial court rulings, and economic instability can create anxiety, increasing existential fears for lawyers and others.

Facing fear

How do we utilize our understanding about fear to increase our well-being? Kristin Neff, a leading researcher and writer on self-compassion, states that “we need to turn toward and be with our difficult emotions so we can heal.” We know that life isn’t easy and that it doesn’t help to run from our feelings. However, acknowledging and addressing our fear can lead initially to greater pain, causing us to turn away.

“Run to the roar” is a proverb whose message is about facing our fear. This proverb derives from when hunting lions leave the oldest or weakest lion on one side of a watering hole. The stronger, faster, younger lions hide in the brush on the opposite end of the watering hole. The older weaker lion, incapable of hunting, emerges to roar in a fearsome, terrifying way at the gathered wildebeests, gazelles, or antelopes. The prey runs away from the roar into the greater danger of the waiting pride. The moral of this proverb is that facing our fear and running toward it may be the best way to overcome our fear and to heal. While fear is horrible, terrifying, and painful, if we don’t face it, we will be

ambushed or overtaken by it eventually.

This may be why Ralph Waldo Emerson tells us to always do what we are afraid to do. What can help us do this? Neff tells us to begin by labeling our emotion: “Name it and you tame it.” Recognizing an experience as fear, what type of fear it is, the intensity, and other accompanying emotions, helps us choose the best response. In “Nerve,” Holland describes how doctors treating soldiers in World War I were ordered not to use the term “shell shock.” In more recent conflicts, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was not understood sufficiently by doctors treating combat soldiers, partly because research into the similar condition of shell shock had been discouraged for decades. Once PTSD was properly named and acknowledged, treatment for this disorder in both military personnel and civilians was revolutionized.

Exploring our fear

Neff reminds us that we must address our fear, but gradually so as not to overwhelm ourselves. We can recognize the thoughts and bodily sensations that go with the emotion. “Feel it and you heal it.”

Using mindfulness tools such as breathing, meditation, and grounding techniques can help. We can explore our discomfort by asking ourselves what we’re thinking and feeling. This exploration leads to developing tolerance of the feeling of fear and recognizing its value.

Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh spoke of this when he said unexamined “fear keeps us focused on the past or worried about the future. If we can acknowledge our fear, we can realize that right now we are OK. Right now, today, we are still alive.” (Hanh died in 2022 at the age of 95.)

Accepting our fear as natural and human helps us process it more quickly. Everyone experiences fear. Your fear is, in most cases, a reasonable response to threatening or uncertain circumstances. Recognizing our fears can lead us to productive responses to the threats behind them. Talk to those you trust about your fears. You will likely find that they have had similar experiences.

When you find that your fears become overwhelming or unmanageable, there are many interventions available. Call the Lawyers’ Assistance Program to get the help you need. 