

## Working with Fear

Fear has two primitive functions, each of which can sometimes be helpful in the modern world:

1. **Escape.** Fear motivates us to escape dangerous situations when we find ourselves in them. With the stress response activated, you can escape more quickly than you usually could.
2. **Avoid.** Fear teaches us not to get into those situations in the future. We learn to associate certain situations (the area near a bear's den, for example) with danger, so we fear even the prospect of entering those situations. This can help keep us safe.

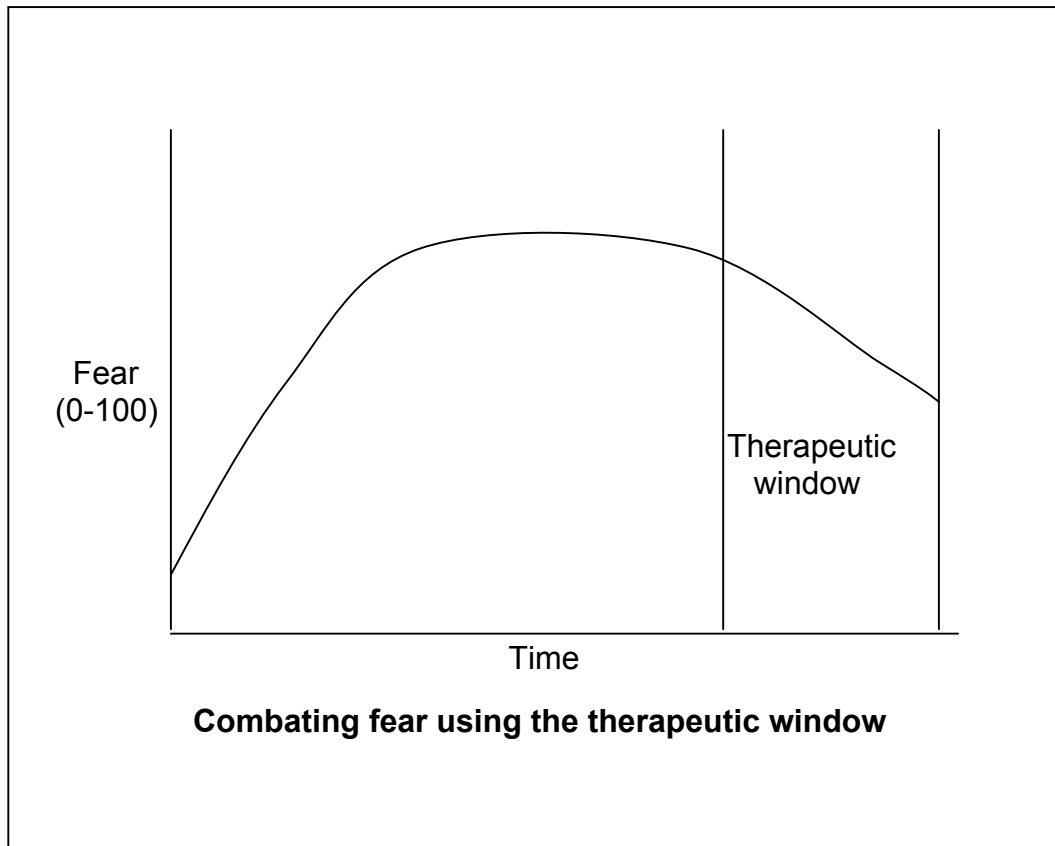
In modern culture we often feel fear and want to escape in situations from which escape does not solve the problem. Running away from the work presentation doesn't help; we'll only have to do it tomorrow. Not opening our credit card bill doesn't reduce the amount payable. "Forgetting" our dental appointment doesn't fix the broken tooth.

In fact, in most modern situations avoidance makes things worse. Work gets more stressful, the bank adds late charges to the credit card bill, the tooth gets more painful.

As well, avoidance tends to generalize. At first we avoid the intersection where our car was hit, then we avoid intersections like it, then we avoid driving altogether. We think we are escaping our fear, when in reality we only make it bigger. Avoidance grows our fears; it does not shrink them.

How, then, do we overcome our fears? Neither of the two obvious strategies works well. Avoidance breeds avoidance and causes our fears to generalize. Barreling forward (doing your best) doesn't work all that well either. *"I'm just going to go straight to the intersection that bothers me the most until I can't stand it anymore!"* We jump into the deep end of the pool, become overwhelmed by our fear, and scramble out before we have a chance to get used to it.

The solution is to take a more gradual approach. Identify what you fear and why. If it's a reasonable fear (*"I'm reluctant to jump off this cliff"*), then fine: keep it. If not, then identify how much fear it causes (perhaps on a 0-100 scale) and how much you are willing to tolerate. *"Since the accident I fear the open ocean 90/100, but I can only handle 60/100 before freaking out and running away."* Then think of something similar that produces a degree of fear, but not more than you can tolerate. *"I have about 50/100 fear of the little pond at the back of my uncle's place, because it's not as rough or deep as the ocean."* Then move toward your fear. Put yourself in the manageable situation and *stay there*. You should notice a pattern in your fear, illustrated on the next page.



You get in the situation and your fear rises fairly rapidly. At first it seems as though it will rise forever, until you explode or lose your mind. Eventually it levels off, then (finally) begins to decline. You're still in the situation (wading in your uncle's pond, standing on the ladder, looking at the spider, standing near the intersection), but the fear begins to fade. This is the "therapeutic window", the period during which the link between your fear and the situation is being weakened. The longer you stay in the situation, the weaker the link gets. If you leave the situation before you get to the therapeutic window, the fear usually gets stronger. It isn't necessary to stay until your fear is gone altogether (though this would be ideal). The link fades as long as you remain in the situation with your fear decreasing.

Notice that you don't *fight* your fear this way. You aren't saying to yourself "*I must not be afraid! It would be terrible if I was afraid!*" Far from it. You are welcoming the fear, greeting it. But you are staying long enough to watch it sail away into the distance. The fantasy with fear is that it will come, drop anchor, and stay forever. By staying in the situation you give it a chance to depart on its own. Once you really *know* at an instinctive level (rather than an intellectual one) that fear leaves, it becomes less difficult to tolerate its occasional presence. And the more you can tolerate your fear, the less it tends to come. It is the fear of fear that brings fear.

Once you have mastered one fear-producing situation, you are ready for a more difficult one. The work you do at each step makes each subsequent step easier. It's like a staircase: it might be hard to go from the bottom to the top step, but taking the first step brings the next into easy range.

Does fear seem to be a big factor in your life? What are you afraid of? Try to identify something specific: heights, cats, meeting people, public speaking, crowds, grocery stores, open water, busy traffic, or ...?

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A fear is reasonable if you are really in danger in these situations. Are you?

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If you're not sure, consult other people. *"How likely is it, really, that the balcony will fall off the side of this building?"* If you really are in danger (for example, if your concentration problems make you a poor driver right now), then avoidance is fine. Otherwise, the way to work with your fear is to approach it gradually.

How much fear can you tolerate? Rate this on a 0-100 scale where 0 is none at all and 100 is the most fear you have ever felt in your life.

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What would put you into contact with your fear without exceeding your tolerance? For example, if you are afraid of heights, perhaps you could stand at a second floor balcony or on a chair. If you're not sure about how fearful an exercise will be, err on the side of caution.

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Once you have mastered this step, go back and come up with a more difficult one. Continue until you have met your goal.

This approach to fear is discussed in more detail in Edmund Bourne's *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*. The general principle, however, is this: the way to overcome avoidance is neither to give in nor to barrel through. It is to mark the direction of our fears and move gently toward them. *The way past your fear is to lean into it.*

We can broaden the recommendation, however, to suggest that your fears point you in the direction of future growth. They mark the areas of life left unexplored, the forbidden ground of our own minds. The doorway to a larger life is always guarded by fear, and without courage we remain sitting in the waiting room. The comfort and safety of the room is illusory, because if left unchallenged the fear only grows larger and the waiting room shrinks.

*Make your fear your agenda.*