

## MY CONCEPTS - FEAR

**Be fearful but don't be ruled by fear.**

**Caution is a careful forethought to avoid danger or harm and paying close attention or vigilance to minimize risk.**

**Take time to properly define danger, harm or risk otherwise your cautious nature or instinct will work against you and prevent you from experiencing some of the most beautiful things that life has to offer.**

Fear is a very unpleasant or disturbing feeling caused by the presence or imminence of danger. My sense of fear is an early warning system that alerts me of possible danger and the need to take action. So when properly utilized it is the best friend I have but when not it can be my worst enemy.

Fear is the price of being human, so it is normal to be frightened when I encounter something unfamiliar or unsettling. Fear is a spectrum of emotions that ranges from being mildly uneasy and apprehensive to intense overpowering feeling of terror. It is important to remember that fear is a mental state that arises spontaneously rather than through conscious effort, then accompanied by physiological changes that are recognizable.

It may occur in contrast to reason or even when there is no apparent reason for it. In other words I don't ask to be fearful, it happens as a response to real or imagined danger, conscious or unconscious.

I still remember it like it was yesterday it was just before my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday that I had made a decision to come back to Canada. My heart still pounds when I think about it, it was one of the most terrifying decisions I have ever made but also the most pivotal (although I did not know it at the time).

I verbalized this decision to my brother and this seemed to make it real. Now I was committed and could not just back out, someone else knew about it. Although I was born in Canada, Nigeria was the only country I really knew and despite all its problems, at least it was a society I understood. If it was not for my perceived lack of opportunities I would have questioned my decision to try and be successful in Canada, in a society that I knew nothing about.

The months went by very quickly and it was soon the day to depart. I can still remember the intense overpowering sense of fear as we approached the airport. I had never really been away from home and I could always count on running into a familiar face so the thought that I may never see any of them again left me in a state of extreme anxiety.

I must have silently changed my mind fifty times or more before it was time to check in at the airport, even though all my loved ones were there to see me off I still was not sure if I would get on the plane, I felt like a high flying trapeze artist who in a moment of bravado had decided to do the act without a safety net and was just coming to the realization that he had put his survival in jeopardy.

There are many good things I have been able to accomplish, these have happened while I was fearful, my ability to process my fear has been key to these accomplishments. In the military we used to say “there are old soldiers and bold soldiers but no old bold soldiers”. Anyone who has ever been called a hero has accomplished this feat because they somehow learned how to “process” fear.

Ever since I can remember I have always been afraid, it started when I was very young about the time I realized that people die and nothing lasts forever. At some point I was reassured by the constancy of my parents presence and I soon convinced myself that good things happened to good people and bad things happened to bad people, so as long I stayed good I had nothing to worry about.

This theory was seriously tested when my father died suddenly and tragically in a car accident two months before my tenth birthday.

After many years of mourning and being terrified most of the time, I realized that it was okay to be afraid, in fact I would be an idiot not to be afraid considering the fact that being alive meant I was always in imminent danger.

It was not my fear that was handicapping me, it was what I was doing with my fear. I was allowing it to occupy most of my attention and my imagination was constantly in the direction of the results I did not want

The more I tried to understand my fear the more entangled my imagination was in fear having the opposite effect of what I wanted. I tried to conquer it by denying its existence or doing daredevil things to convince myself that I was not afraid but this was time consuming and potentially dangerous.

As an adolescent and young adult I suffered from crippling panic attacks that simply appeared out of nowhere and stayed with me until I learned how to adapt. When these attacks occurred, things would suddenly seem like I was in a tunnel, sound was muffled and nothing seemed real. I felt like I was losing my mind, my thoughts would race until a full blown panic frenzy developed.

There was a tingling around my lips and I would feel that I could not breathe as I was engulfed with sheer terror and my legs turned to lead, I felt rooted to the spot, fully convinced that I was about to die. My fingers and toes would start to curl in spasm as though they had a mind of their own and on some occasions my body would shut down resulting in a fainting spell, with things returning to normal when I awoke.

These attacks grew more frequent and unpredictable holding me complete hostage and making it almost impossible to do anything socially, I was always wondering when I would make a complete fool of myself.

I decided to make a list of what I experienced during the attacks and these were:

- 1) A fear of losing my mind,
- 2) A feeling of depersonalization or disconnection from everything around me
- 3) Noise and light sensitivity
- 4) Lip tingling and limb cramping
- 5) Profound fatigue after the attack was over

I found that by detailing and reviewing my experience it made the next attack somewhat familiar and not as scary. Rather than trying to control these attacks, I started adapting to them. In my mind, I visualized I was on a beach, the waves were coming in and it was impossible to control the surf so I climbed on my surfboard and rode the waves.

I figured out that if I was losing my mind I would be unlikely to know it. So if I could even think that I was losing my mind there was a good chance that I was not because I still had insight. So from then on when I experienced that feeling I reminded myself that I was having a panic attack.

I also determined that any form of thought when I was having a panic attack acted as an accelerant in the same manner that pouring gasoline on a camp fire is always a recipe for disaster. However since it is virtually impossible to empty my mind of all thoughts to make my mind still, I would have to distract myself by focusing on just one thing, repeatedly and to the exclusion of everything else.

It could be a phrase or number but I had to be able to repeat it continuously without the need to think about it. I soon realized that it was important to say it aloud while breathing into my hands, firstly, it reminded me that I was alive, that I was breathing and to remember to pace my breathing as slow as possible. I repeated the phrase over and over again (I chose 99) without any attempt to think or interact with anybody around me even when they asked me questions.

The first few times I tried this technique I failed quite woefully but I was not discouraged. I realized I had to practice it before I was

actually in an attack, so I did it over and over again until it came very naturally.

I will never forget the moment I first successfully took control of a panic attack and felt the wave receding without making a fool of myself, I had to ride six waves in that one attack but I had successfully adapted, I have not had a panic attack in many years.

When I arrived in Canada and was inundated with so many challenges I stopped trying to understand why I was afraid, I simply did not have the time or luxury for self analysis, nor did I try to conquer my fear because I did not have the time or energy to do so. What I did was “process” my fear.

I found peace when I discovered how to “process” my fear. I recognized that I was afraid (which is most of the time) by becoming aware of the psychological and physiological effects it produced, I then reminded myself that it meant that I felt threatened or in danger and so I needed to reassess what I was doing.

I soon realized that I was most fearful when I was experiencing significant changes. When I allowed myself to be aware of this fear (rather than suppress it), I seemed more able to channel my energy into getting the results that I wanted.

Over the years I have concluded that there are two types of fear that I experience, **“productive fear”** and **“unproductive fear”**. Productive fear is one of my best friends and is created when I “process” my fear properly, it reminds me of my mortality and allows me to continuously monitor my environment and make survival decisions some of which I do unconsciously without even being aware until much later. Unproductive fear however occurs when I do not process my fear and it overwhelms me decreasing my ability to make appropriate decisions.

I find now that I experience productive fear as a strange mixture of excitement and trepidation, hope and dread. It is usually a clear

indication that change is required and imminent.

The important step in processing my fear to make it productive are:

**1) Recognition:** I become aware of the psychological and physiological effects of my fear and recognize them when they occur

**2) Acceptance:** I do not spend energy trying to understand my fear or try to control it but simply accept the fact that I am afraid and move on to action.

**3) Action:** I allow my imagination to engage in non fearful imagery and in this manner I create the actions that move me in the direction of the results that I want. So rather than focus on trying to be less fearful (and have my imagination engaged in fear)) I focus on what I have to do get the results I want. For example I have a phobia for heights but I am able to ride over the trestles of Myra Canyon in Kelowna by not trying to understand my phobia, accepting it and focusing on riding my bike instead of how frightened I was. It took three or four unsuccessful tries but now I can do it without any problem. Desensitization and flooding are already well established forms of therapy in treatment of phobias.

My first job in Canada was working as a security guard. The security company I worked for gave me an assignment at a pharmaceutical company on Steeles Avenue and Yonge Street in Toronto and I worked in the guardhouse with 3 other guards. Where I lived (Birchmount & Finch) was a significant distance from this location and it took me over an hour to get to work with multiple bus changes. The other members of the crew were not very friendly.

I had racial slurs used on more than one occasion and being unaware at the time that this was not considered an acceptable practice in Canada I did not take any action. An elderly gentleman was particularly brazen and would repeatedly take out his white handkerchief and wipe his hand after shaking my hand or say things like “take your cotton picking hands off me.”

I had never really been bullied before (in fact I am not sure that I

thought of it in those terms) and so I did not know what to do. I was very afraid of losing my job so I kept my head down and hoped that they would ignore me but the harassment just got worse.

It was unclear to me at the time why I was so afraid of these men but I allowed myself to recognize this fear and accept it. I started considering what kind of action I could take. I observed that the elderly gentleman was quite religious and had a bible with him all the time sometimes reading silently from it.

One day, I said to him, "I know you are a very good man and one day when you die, which I hope would not be for a long time, you will definitely go to heaven". He seemed genuinely surprised and touched by my comment (probably started feeling a little guilty) and he then said "that was a very nice thing to say Toye, thank you very much". Then I continued by saying "I only worry about one thing for you", so he asked me what that was and I said, "what will you do when you get to heaven and find out that God is black"?

The look on his face was priceless and for once he was speechless, he did not say anything at all and I went about my business. I noticed that he stopped harassing me and two weeks later he emotionally came to apologize for the way he had treated me, he told me that he had never considered the possibility that God may be black and after I had said that to him he could not stop thinking about it.

I felt quite elated by this result but unfortunately two days later I was in conflict with the man in charge of security of the building. I refused to fold some personal flyers he brought into the guardhouse (about two hundred of them). It was clear to me that this was definitely not my job and after 6 months working as a guard in Canada I was starting to realize that I had the right to be treated like a human being. He informed me that I had two choices, fold the flyers or make sure I was not there when he got back so I got up and left.

In retrospect, I realize that the organization would probably have

been horrified if they knew how I was being treated but I was clearly unaware of my rights at the time. I was unemployed for the next three weeks and almost ended up on the streets, I even interviewed for a job as a dishwasher and was not hired but I invariably found a job in a chemical factory. This experience allowed me to realize that my worst fears were not as bad as I thought they would be when I actually experienced them, though I remained fearful of many things (and I still do), I would never allow it to rule me again.

I have accomplished a lot of things through processing my emotions and my fears. For example, when I am angry I realize it is because I feel threatened and so I don't try to feel less angry but simply identify the threat (real or imagined) and process it i.e. identify what I can do about it and then do it. It is important when processing fear that the intervals between recognition, acceptance and action are as such as possible.

Note that taking action with fear is different from trying to control it. Being with fear is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. By recognizing how fearful I am and being comfortable with it makes me less vulnerable to fear mongers and people who profit from fear. Not trying to control it brings about a realization that there are a lot of things that I have no control over and it allows me to focus on where I have control.

I discovered that trying to understand or control my fear would often result in my imagination being focused on it with the development of "unproductive fear". Unproductive fear is characterized by energy wastage, dysfunctional movement (non-directional, non-movement, excessive movement ) and dysfunctional action (overcompensation and bravado, terror, inactivity and complete de-compensation).

I now take ownership of my decisions and my existence. I have taught myself to understand that all change is fearful so when I feel fear I know change is coming and I welcome the fear and focus on the results that I want.



## Points to remember:

Fear is an important early detection system

By properly processing fear you create a “productive fear” that has significant survival value

Processing fear to make it productive involves:

- 1) **Recognition:** Being aware of the psychological and physiological effects of my fear and recognizing them when they occur
- 2) **Acceptance:** Not spending energy trying to understand it or try to control it but simply accept the fact that I am afraid and move on to action.
- 3) **Action:** Allow my imagination to engage a manner that creates the actions that move me in the direction of the results I want even though I still remain fearful.

Trying to understand or control fear can often be counter-productive when quick action response is required.