

FEAR

“Be fearful but don’t be ruled by fear”.

The concept of caution refers to thinking carefully to avoid danger or harm and paying close attention to minimize risk to avoid harm.

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.

When danger is present or imminent, one feels fear, an unpleasant or disturbing emotion. Fear is an early warning system that alerts me to possible dangers and the need to act, so when used effectively, it can be my best friend, but if not, it can be my worst enemy.

Being human makes me feel frightened when I encounter something unfamiliar or unsettling, so it is normal to feel this way. From a mild sense of apprehension to intense and overwhelming fear, fear can be a spectrum of emotions. My experience of fear has shown me that it's a mental state that arises spontaneously rather than consciously, and that it's accompanied by physiological changes.

Even when there is no apparent reason for it, it may occur contrary to reason. To put it another way, I don't ask to be fearful, it just happens, whether conscious or unconscious, in response to real or imagined danger. Just before my 24th birthday, I decided to move back to Canada and still remember it like it was yesterday. In retrospect, this was one of the most terrifying decisions I had ever made, and one of the most pivotal (although I didn't realize it then).

By verbalizing my decision to my brother, I felt committed to it and could not just back out because someone else knew. Despite being born in Canada, Nigeria was the only country I really knew, and despite all its problems, it was still a society I understood, and I may have questioned my decision to try and succeed in Canada, in a society I did not know anything about if it were not for my perceived lack of opportunities.

The months went by very quickly and it was soon the day to depart, which made me feel intensely scared as we approached the airport. I had never really been away from home before, and I knew I would always run into a familiar face, so I felt extreme anxiety thinking I might never see them again.

I must have silently changed my mind 50 times before it was time to check in at the airport and even though all my loved ones were there to see me off, I still wasn't sure if I was going to get on the plane. The act was like a trapeze artist who decided in a moment of bravado to perform it without a safety net, only to realize that he was putting his survival at risk.

I have accomplished many good things while fearful, and my ability to process my fear has made these accomplishments possible. "There are old soldiers and bold soldiers, but there are no old bold soldiers". All heroes have overcome fear by somehow learning to "process" it.

Whenever I can recall, I have always been afraid. It began when I was very young, when I realized that people die, and nothing lasts forever. After a while, I became reassured by my parents' constant presence and soon convinced myself that good things happened to good people and bad things happened to bad people, so as long as I stayed good, I had nothing to worry about.

When my father died suddenly and tragically in a car accident two months before my tenth birthday, this theory was seriously challenged. It took me many years to realize that it was okay to be afraid. I would be an idiot not to be afraid because life is always full of danger.

In fact, it was my way of dealing with my fear that handicapped me, not my fear itself. Almost all my attention was devoted to it, and my imagination was constantly pointing towards undesirable outcomes.

As I tried to understand my fear, my imagination became entangled in fear and this process had the opposite effect of what I wanted. To overcome it, I denied its existence or did daredevil things to convince myself that I wasn't afraid, but this was time consuming and potentially dangerous.

As an adolescent and young adult, I suffered from crippling panic attacks that appeared out of nowhere and remained with me until I learned how to cope. Suddenly, everything would become muffled, and nothing seemed real, my thoughts would race until a full-blown panic frenzy had developed. I felt as if I was in a tunnel, sound was muffled, everything seemed unreal, and I felt like I was losing my mind.

The tingling in my lips, the feeling that I couldn't breathe, and the feeling that my legs had turned into lead engulfed me in sheer terror as I felt rooted to the spot and completely convinced of my impending death. In some instances, my fingers and toes curled in spasms as though they were acting on their own, and I would faint, awaking to find everything back to normal.

It became almost impossible to do anything socially and I always wondered when I would make a complete fool of myself when these attacks grew more frequent and unpredictable.

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

A fear of losing my mind.

A feeling of depersonalization or disconnection from everything around me

Noise and light sensitivity

Lip tingling and limb cramping

A profound feeling of exhaustion after the attack

Simply detailing and reviewing my experience made the next attack somewhat familiar and less frightening. Rather than trying to control these attacks, I began adapting to them. I imagined myself on the beach, riding the waves and trying to control them, but I couldn't, so I climbed on my surfboard and rode them.

In thinking about it, I realized that I would not be able to know if I was losing my mind if I was. If I even thought I was losing my mind, there was a good chance that I wasn't, since I still had insight. Whenever I felt that way from then on, I reminded myself 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 campfire is always a recipe for disaster. Since it is virtually impossible for me to empty my mind of all thoughts, I would have to focus on just one thing repeatedly, ignoring everything else, so that my mind would remain still.

A phrase or number could be used, but I needed to be able to repeat it continuously without thinking about it. I realized how important it was to say it aloud while breathing into my hands; firstly, it reminded me that I was alive, that I was breathing, and to pace my breathing slowly. My mind was occupied with repeating the phrase (I chose 99) over and over, failing to think or interact with anyone around me.

My first few attempts at this technique failed horribly, but I did not give up. To become accustomed to it, I practiced it repeatedly before I was in an attack.

I will never forget the moment when I successfully took control of a panic attack by not trying to control and feeling the wave receding without making a fool of myself; I had to ride six waves in that attack, but I had adapted successfully and haven't had a panic attack since.

After arriving in Canada and being confronted with so many challenges, I simply did not have the time or energy for self-analysis, nor did I attempt to conquer it, all I did was process it. It was when I discovered how to process my fear that I found peace. To recognize I was afraid (which is most of the time), I looked at the psychological and physiological effects it produced. I knew it meant I felt threatened or in danger, so I reassessed my actions.

In time, I realized that I was most afraid when experiencing significant changes, and that I was more able to channel my energy into getting results when I allowed myself to be aware of this fear (rather than suppress it).

Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that there are both "productive fears" and "unproductive fears". When I process my fear correctly, productive fear is created. It reminds me of my mortality and allows me to monitor my environment and make survival decisions unconsciously without even being aware of it.

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 key steps in processing my fear to make it productive are:

- 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 control it but simply accepting the fact that I am afraid and moving on to action.
- 3) **Action:** Make my imagination work in a way that creates the actions that move me towards my desired results, despite my fear.

Rather than focusing on how to become less fearful (and engaging my imagination in fear), I focus on what I must do to accomplish my goal. Despite

having a fear of heights, I was able to ride over the trestles of Myra Canyon in Kelowna by accepting my phobia and focusing on riding my bike instead of how terrified I was. After three or four unsuccessful attempts, I am now able to perform the task. In the treatment of phobias, desensitization and flooding are already well-established methods.

The first job I had in Canada was as a security guard. The security company I worked for assigned me to a pharmaceutical company on Steeles Avenue and Yonge Street in Toronto, where I worked with 3 other guards in the guardhouse. My home (Birchmount & Finch) was a considerable distance from this location, so it took me over an hour to get there with multiple bus changes. Other crew members weren't very friendly.

Having been subjected to racial slurs on more than one occasion, I did not take any action because I was unaware that it was not acceptable in Canada. An elderly gentleman was particularly brazen and would repeatedly pull out his white handkerchief and wipe his hand after shaking my hand. He would also say things like "take your cotton-picking hands off me."

Having never experienced bullying before (in fact, I don't think that I thought of it in those terms), I didn't know what to do and was afraid of losing my job, so I kept my head down and hoped they would ignore me, but the harassment continued.

At the time, I did not understand why I was so afraid of these men, but I allowed myself to acknowledge and accept it and began considering my options. The elderly gentleman was quite religious and carried a bible with him all the time and read from it silently sometimes.

One day I told him, "I know you are a very good man, and one day when you die, which I hope won't be for a long time, you will definitely go to heaven". It seemed he was genuinely surprised and touched by my comment (probably feeling a little guilty) and then said, "that was a very nice thing to say thank you very much." Then I continued by saying "I only worry about one thing for you" and he asked me what that was. Upon arriving in heaven, I asked, "what will you do when you realize God is black?".

The look on his face was priceless and for once he was speechless; he didn't say anything, and I went about my business. After a couple of weeks, he stopped harassing me and two weeks after that he emotionally apologized to me for how he had treated me. He told me that he had never considered that God might be

black, and when I mentioned that to him, he was unable to stop thinking about it.

My elation at this result was short-lived, however, as two days later I found myself in conflict with the security guard, since I refused to fold some "personal" flyers he brought into the guardhouse (at least two hundred) and it was clear to me by now that this was not my job, and I was starting to realize that I had the right to be treated properly. I got up and left after he told me I had two options: fold the flyers or leave before he returned.

Upon reflection, I realize that the organization would have been horrified if they had known how I had been treated, but I was unaware of my rights at the time. For the next three weeks, I remained unemployed and almost ended up on the streets. I even interviewed for a job as a dishwasher but was not hired. I eventually found a job at a chemical factory, and this experience taught me that my worst fears weren't as bad as I thought they would be when I had to face them in person. Despite remaining fearful of many things (and still do), I will never let them rule me again.

Through processing fear, I have accomplished a lot of things. When I am angry, I recognize it is because I feel threatened, so I don't try to feel less angry, but rather identify the threat (real or imagined) and process it, i.e. figure out what I can do to deal with it. Whenever fear is being processed, it is important not to let too much time lapse between recognition, acceptance, and action.

It is important to note that acting with fear is different from trying to control it. You can be strong even when you are afraid. Knowing how fearful you are and being comfortable with it makes you less vulnerable to fear mongers and those who profit from it. Taking away the need to control it opens your eyes to the fact that there are many things outside of your control, which gives you the option to focus on what you can control.

Trying to understand my fear often resulted in my imagination being focused on it, resulting in "unproductive fear," characterized by energy waste and dysfunctional movement (non-directional, non-movement, excessive movement). In my experience, controlling my fear causes me to take dysfunctional actions, such as overcompensation, bravado, terror, inactivity, and complete decompensation.).

I now take responsibility for my decisions and my existence. Change is always frightening, so whenever I feel fear, I know change is coming. I welcome the fear and focus on the positive change I want.

Points to remember:

Fear is a valuable 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 control it but simply accepting the fact that I am afraid and moving on to action.
- 3) **Action:** Allow my imagination to engage in a manner that creates the actions that move me in the direction of the results I want even though I remain fearful.

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