

# The Freudian Slip

Pathways to Discernment

Reprint March 2007

## WHAT'S LURKING IN THE DARK???

### Thriving in the Face of Fear

**F**ear is a very powerful emotion. Just look at the sayings there are about fear! According to these sayings a person can be stopped dead, have a coronary, be paralyzed, lose control of body functions and go crazy. These are ghastly things to happen to a person because of fear. So it seems wise to be afraid to be afraid.

One thing fear can do to a person is to create so much anxiety that he or she will feel as though he or she is having a coronary, going mad, and/ or is paralyzed. When fear takes a grip on a person, it is as though the individual is mesmerized by the fear and cannot respond appropriately. We all know this as the "deer-in-the-headlights" syndrome.

We all get scared, but not to the same degree. Some people may not be bothered by fear, while others are. Even in the group bothered by fear, the group can be divided into those being afraid vs. those being petrified by fear. What is the difference between these two groups of people?

Well, to answer this question one would have to look at the effect a fearful situation, person or event had on the person. Was the event, situation or relationship traumatic? Were the consequences from the relationship, event or situation severely extreme or slightly consequential? By using a range to rate fearful situations, events or relationships, then fear's severity can be placed on a continuum.

An individual's ability to cope with fear can also be placed on a continuum. This relates to an individual's ability to cope, what resources are available, his or her level of emotional development, his or her level of self esteem and/ or his or her level of feeling secure.

So to address the issue of fear, one has to take into consideration two distinct continuums. One affects the other. For example, an individual on the wellness end of the continuum would have more coping skills available to deal with fear producing things or people. Conversely, an individual on the non-wellness end of the continuum would have less coping skills to deal with fear.

The age of the individual at the time of the fear producing incident affects the continuum, because of the individual's level of development, problem solving ability and resource availability. A child or adolescent does not have

the same level of development as an adult. Fearful things or people would be more impressionable for a child than they would be for an adult.

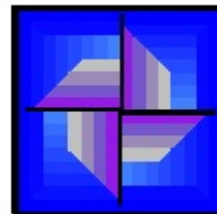
Traumatic events are severely fearful no matter where a person is on the continuum. Traumatic events are bad for any age group, but are worse for individuals on the non-wellness end and for children. The lack of effective coping skills allows the wound from the trauma to be deeper, more emotionally disturbing and having longer effects on the individual. So fear is a multifaceted emotion that varies in severity from person to person.

Is fear a bad emotion? No, it is not. Fear has been a part of our survival mechanisms since the start of time. Fear alerts us to danger by preparing us to fight or run away. Dangers come in all forms, in that they can be real or perceived. The real dangers have been the same throughout the ages, in that these cause bodily injury and/ or death. Perceived dangers are the subtle situations that deal with the unknown. These types of dangers have a focus on future events.

Sometimes these perceived threats do happen. Sometimes they do not. It is the "what if's" that can paralyze an individual. A person knows when he or she has a bad case of the "what if's" when his or her imagination is running wild with every worse case scenario of what will happen.

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So in these "what if" situations, fear is usually related to the unknown. What is scary about the unknown? Usually the fear relates to not knowing what to expect. It is this unpredictability of the unknown that fuels the anxiety of fear. With predictability, a level of comfort and control is gained. Usually a person can fairly accurately predict another's reactions, knowing what to expect in a given situation. But when a person steps out into the unknown, he or she is taking a risk.

Usually there are good reasons why a person needs to feel a level of comfort by controlling situations and/ or outcomes. These reasons have been learned and used as a way of dealing with life. This is how each of us protects ourselves from being physically or emotionally hurt. So when our protective mechanisms fail us, fear often emerges.

To deal effectively with fear, one needs to examine the reasons he or she is fearful. The reasons for fear usually are related to events, situations or relationships that occurred in the past. The self-talk an individual has about his or her feelings related to these prior events, situations or relationships plays a key roll in accentuating fear induced immobility.

Examples of self-talk induced feelings would be pride, self-pity, gloominess, dismal forebodings, failure, bitterness, brooding, worry and anxiety. Each of these feelings is past or future related, which are felt in the present. So how do these bad feelings keep a person immobilized by fear? Self-talk can be reinforcing, which can develop into a self-fulfilling prophesy.

For example, if pride is the fear triggered emotion, the usual self-talk relates to reputation, other people's opinions or possibly the consequences that would be unacceptable for the individual. Self-talk related to feelings of self-pity, gloominess, dismal forebodings and failure perpetuate the belief an individual has about others' unreliability, support, loyalty or self ability. Nothing seems to work and the world is seen and experienced as a bad place. So the self-talk is reinforced with more self-talk of "why try."

Worry and anxiety deal with the "what ifs." Fear holds the self-talk to focus only on the perceived consequences of the situation, event or relationship. An individual is stuck in the uncomfortable belief that any decision made is perceived to be the wrong decision.

Each of these bad feelings is usually triggered by an experience in the past that caused emotional pain. For example, if an individual was severely ridiculed by people; making new friendships and trusting others will be a fearful struggle. So in actuality, fear is a pain-based emotion.

Alleviating the pain requires changing the self-talk related to perpetuating the fear. If it is not changed, depressing situations emerge and the individual is immobilized from fear. An individual can allow fear to be his or her friend by alerting him or her to the obvious and subtle red flags sensed in situations, events and relationships.

To do this, then an individual needs to be able to trust his or her judgment. However, for some people, trusting themselves or others is very risky business. When he or she has trusted, this usually goes against the individual's instincts of not trusting anyone. To break the cycle of immobilizing fear, the automatic thoughts are the keys to overcome fear, because these thoughts are the triggers. The first step is examining these automatic thoughts by determining if they are realistic or unrealistic

For instance, when an individual has a thought of "I am not safe," then the individual needs to examine why he or she is not safe. Is it because the individual is going to be physically hurt? Is it because the individual is leery of the motives of the other person? Is it because the individual feels anxious about the other person being upset with him or her?

In changing fear's grip on a person, risks are necessary. By risks, I mean changing the manner in which a person views the world and himself/herself. This does not mean having a "rose-colored-glasses" view of the world. It does mean for an individual to have a more fact-based reality of the world.

In changing automatic thoughts to more fact-based thoughts, the question of safety becomes, "How am I not safe?" The individual can list the reasons he or she believes he or she is not safe. The individual can then rate the likelihood of his or her safety being in jeopardy. By safety, I am referring to an event, situation or person inflicting bodily injury on an individual.

By objectifying the fear producing issues, a person has options available to him or her. Options act as a mobilizer, which can help to empower an individual from being consumed by fear. Victims are people consumed by fear. The reasons for remaining consumed by fear lessen when options begin to shed light on the darkness of fear.

Acting on options provides a means to enable an individual to increase his or her risk taking ability. Options are here-and-now focused. A person can only affect change in the present, which affects the future. By living more in the here-and-now, an individual can take a more fact based realistic view of fearful people, situations and events.

The fears of the future and the past can gain more perspective by living with the options available in the present. As the options of the present become incorporated in a person's life, the wounds from his or her past can begin to heal. This is the method for thriving in the face of fear.

### **Suggested Readings:**

*The Dance of Fear* by Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.

*Restoring Hope & Trust* by Lisa Lewis Ph.D.

*Ms. America by Day* by Marilyn Van Debur

*Hinds Feet on High Places* by Hannah Gurnard

*The Gift of Fear* by Gavin De Becker