

# Fears

By Paul Penner

## **Understanding our fears...**

**Fear** has many faces! ...Imagine the following feelings - terror, dread, apprehension, horror, panic, despair, dismay, helplessness, hopelessness, anxiety, worry, and simply being afraid. Scary lot aren't they!? Some people actually live for long periods of time under these emotions. I have felt most of these feelings; some of them prolonged. They have shaped questions in my heart and intensified my thirst for God.

Language attempts to capture distinctions. What good are different words if they don't capture slightly different meaning? Particular words are chosen by us as they prove useful in describing or communicating our unique subjective experiences of fear. They motivate us to seek the kind of relief that corresponds with the unique need. If misunderstood, these emotions can become giants in our lives. Each of these emotions is different and reflects slightly different contexts in the mix of factors that constitute fear.

*The following is an attempt to capture the nuances of different fear emotions... **Fear** is just the subjective experience of anticipating something unwanted – like sitting in the dentist's chair waiting for the needle. Anticipating something unwanted can be felt physically and emotionally the same as if it were really happening! We tend to remember what matters to us and pain is one of those things that tend to matter. How the body remembers involves not just pictures in our mind but also an effect in our bodies, which involves reproducing the same hormonal mix in our bodies, which occurred at the time of the initial unwanted experience. A **trigger**, which really is just anything in the present, which bears some association to a past painful or threatening experience, becomes a signal for the body to reconfigure physically its defensive hormonal mix, which existed in that earlier state. That's why a memory can trigger physical sensations and emotions that were felt in association with a picture memory. The physical symptoms of fear are referred to as **anxiety**. If we start to fear the physical feelings of fear we greatly empower them to become more intense. An anxiety disorder is really a fear of the bodily symptoms of fear. There are a number of different anxiety disorders. We actually strengthen the body's defensive response to a trigger when we fear it. The body's response to fear is self-protective, defensive. It is typically referred to as the stress response, or as the flight or fight response.*

Fear of a specific trigger associated with anxiety symptoms is commonly known as a **phobia**. Common phobias, which are triggers for symptoms of anxiety include: high places, closed in spaces, insects, crowds, etc. which bear some association to previous traumatic occurrences in our life. These are really trigger reactions for unresolved past threatening experiences with which we still associate fear and danger, and we tend to shift the focus of our fear onto the trigger, which we think we have some measure to control through avoidance. This of course is not the root problem, nor the solution.

We give various names to the emotional or psychological experiences of fear. Here are some examples: We dread something we greatly fear that is believed to be imminent and unavoidable. **Dread** is kind of like fearing the worst. **Terror** is being in immediate danger of losing something you can't afford to be without – like your *life, or hope!* To **despair** is to be gripped by the fear that there is no hope for anything important to me. We are in **panic** mode when we are being controlled by reactions to our fear. We are **apprehensive** when we anticipate something unwanted or bad is going to happen. And what about worry? **Worry** is the fear of uncertain outcomes! Imagined negative outcomes play havoc on people's emotions and signal the body to configure the acute stress response, which drains our body of needed resources at rates much faster than when we are in a relaxed state. Worry is hard on our emotions and destructive to our body! **Horror** is to be astonished by the opposite of what one expects or hopes for. We are **dismayed** when we discover that what we are basing our hope on for relief is inadequate.

No one wants to feel helpless or hopeless in the face of fears. The Bible says that Satan actually uses fear as a way of gaining control in our lives (Hebrews 2:14-15). But there is hope and there are healthy responses to the fear family of emotions and next edition we'll look at how we can deal with fear in healthy ways. Stay tuned!

### **A remedy for fear!?**

*Fear* can be a fierce taskmaster – right up there with pain. It can control your emotions, filling you with worry, dread and even terror. It can torment your body with anxiety and trauma reactions. It can fixate your energy on how to avoid what you fear. It can keep you in tunnel vision and rob you of life's little pleasures. Really, it can steal your life from you **if you let it**.

To some of you, implying that something substantial can be done leading to freedom from fear will be like music to your ears. To others who have suffered much under the tyranny of life-robbing fears it could feel like a cruel hoax teasing you to hope, when you have already given up.

For purposes of this article it makes sense to divide fears into two categories: rational and irrational fears. Rational fears are those, which have an identifiable and present source of danger or threat evoking them. Irrational fears are the ones, which ***do not*** have an identifiable source of present danger or threat evoking them. I'll describe irrational fears later. With rational fears, when the physical senses have alerted one to danger - one's body will quickly respond by elevating adrenalin which signals the autonomic response. Elevated adrenalin will instantly marshal other body resources. This is also referred to as the acute stress response commonly known as the flight or fight response.

Accompanying elevated adrenalin many of the following body characteristics will be activated: ie. rapid heart rate to move blood more quickly to major muscle groups; shallow and rapid breathing to improve oxygenation; muscle tension; release of glycogen from body

storage in the muscles and the liver allowing increased energy production; massive release of red blood cells from the spleen allowing the body additional red blood cells which will be available to transport oxygen and sugar to muscles; change of dominant hemisphere of the brain to the part responsible for long term memory limiting cognitive functioning & leaving short term memory impaired; release of LDL cholesterol to facilitate clotting (which is more significant of unhealthy cholesterol than diet!); increased amount of acid released into the digestive system to clear digestive tract (contributing to diarrhea for some); reduction in the amount of mucous in the digestive tract (leaving the dry-mouth feeling); pupil dilation to allow more light in, acute hearing (which can make some people feel like they are hearing things – which I guess they are, just that other people can't hear quite as well); incontinence to some; sweaty hands; difficulty sleeping; trembling at times... need I say more. The body can be transformed into a virtual superman in a flash – but that is in the extreme. Typically we have variations of the above to a lesser degree.

You've all heard about feats of physical strength people have done when someone has been in extreme danger and a daring rescue requiring superhuman strength has been involved. In such a case the flight or fight phenomenon has been triggered to the extreme. I remember watching a program on TV called Real Video where a helicopter crashed into pond pinning a passenger. A man ran into the pond and lifted the 3000 lb. helicopter by himself so a rescue could occur.

When real danger has presented itself it makes sense that the body could quickly respond with resources to protect itself. It is equipped for either fight or flight. God made us this way. And when it is needed it can be a life-saver. ...So... what does one do when 'rational fear' is evoked by real danger? ...make an appropriate response with the goal of reducing the threat of danger or increasing safety. And after the threat has passed, breathe deep and relax.

Thank God for adrenalin, right! But whoa, what if the relaxation part doesn't follow the acute stress in a normal way? Is that possible? Yes it is possible for the acute stress response to work well and the normalization part to experience some interference. This of course is a scary thing when after the threat is gone we still have the feelings of fear. This is called post-trauma.

Sometimes individuals are frightened by this and react in fear, which continues to trigger the acute stress response even though the initial danger has passed. The body remembers the previous state of alarm by imprinting the same hormonal mix associated with the threatening event in the hypothalamus so that they can quickly be reproduced when in a perceived similar situation. It's kind of like a temporary internet file on your computer which allows accelerated processing of information. The down side to this is that the autonomic response can be signalled by mere associations with a previous state of alarm even though there may not be any actual danger. A visual memory, a face, a color, a similar event, a common name, time of the day, or year, or place, etc. Any number of things can trigger memories and with it the feelings experienced at the time. It is when we are afraid of the feelings of fear associated with the memory that we strengthen the imprint on the hypothalamus and program our bodies to respond with the acute stress response even though the danger was in the past and simply being

remembered. Our bodies do not differentiate between fact or fantasy when it comes to the acute stress response. If there is a perception of danger even though it is imagined, our body will react. Just think about nightmares. The danger might only be in our minds – but our body will react with a dump-load of adrenalin anyway.

A factor fuelling symptoms of post trauma reaction, involves inaccurate meaning we attach to feelings because they bear some similarity to unresolved previous experiences. In post trauma reaction the danger is no longer present but similarities evoke the anxiety response as though it were. When we fear the symptoms of anxiety we actually stimulate adrenalin signalling the acute stress response to release the hormonal mix that we want to avoid. People who are afraid of the bodily symptoms of fear are vulnerable to fuelling the very conditions they fear. That's why understanding how the body works is so important to assess the real risk of present danger and reverse irrational fears. Just because the body is anxious doesn't mean that you are in real and present danger. It may reflect a triggered emotion from the past. We need our body and thoughts to be reprogrammed to not fear re-exposure to a previous anxiety-evoking situation. Doing so trains the hypothalamus to associate a relaxed state with the triggers, rather than a state of alarm. The body needs to experience that it is now safe through a gradual re-exposure to what is unreasonably feared.

The feelings of fear, which don't have an identifiable source, need to be evaluated on the basis of whether they reflect real and present danger. If they don't they are indicators of post trauma. One need not be afraid of post trauma – it's like a false alarm! Now you just need to train your body to relax. We'll talk about how this can be done in the next Communique. Stay tuned!

### **The end of all fear!? (At least the end of the articles on 'fear')**

This is the final article on emotions in this series. The first two articles addressed depression and the last two touched on fears. Presently I am challenged with the task of describing how to overcome unwanted fears – in particular, anxiety and say it in one page or less.

The key to defusing symptoms of anxiety is to not be afraid of the symptoms. If we are afraid of how anxiety manifests in our bodies so that we are controlled by this fear we have given it power it doesn't deserve. That is a major factor in how anxiety disorders develop in us – call it the fear of fear.

How many people live under the fear of the unwanted symptoms of anxiety? Many! In and of themselves, feelings of anxiety don't hurt a healthy person. Someone who is already unhealthy might be put at risk because of excessive anxiety – like a person with heart problems, but not the average person. The truth is anxiety just doesn't feel good.

What we really need to do is use feelings of fear to alert us. They are a signal of danger, or an old alarm that hasn't been switched off. A current danger rightly should stimulate anxiety

to marshal needed resources, which will equip us to respond to the threat. But an old alarm needs to be turned off and reset.

That is the key therapeutic objectives with anxiety disorders. Reset the amygdala so that the body is not automatically defaulting to a state of alarm when the danger has past. How does one reset the brain so that the automatic response doesn't kick in? The idea here is the same as the thinking that when you have been bucked off a horse get right back on so that you are not controlled by fear – which is worse than getting bucked off the horse. To act in spite of one's symptoms of anxiety on the basis of accurate understanding that there is no danger to be feared is the key. Psychologically, we think of this as graduated re-expose to anxiety provoking situations based on renewed thinking about its real danger.