

Overcoming Fear

By Steven L. Anderson, Ph.D., MBA

Last month I wrote about the power of passion. In that article I noted that fear is a common companion of passion. This article addresses how to work through fear so that we can live lives dominated by passion. Many people avoid or deny fear, feeling they would be much better off if it never existed. As a matter of fact, we would all be much worse off if fear did not exist. Without fear we could not function. It is critical to our existence.

As a psychologist, I often ask my clients if they wish pain did not exist. They often emphatically state, "Yes!" I tell them life would be impossible without pain. Take for instance the pain you feel when you place your hand upon a hot stove. Because you feel pain you immediately pull your hand away, sparing yourself serious injury. Fear is the emotional equivalent of physical pain.

It may be easiest to explain this physiologically. You have, roughly, 100,000,000,000 neurons in your brain, with approximately 100,000,000,000,000 electrical connections between those neurons. If we are conservative and estimate that each thought requires 1000 neurons (evidence suggests it may be as few as one) and we take each memory and place it in an imaginary manila folder. Now suppose we place twenty-five of those folders in a file drawer. If you took all of the thoughts in your brain and put them in four drawer file cabinets in this fashion, the file cabinets would fill a 300,000 square foot warehouse. That is an inordinate amount of information to sort through when making a decision. It appears that feelings, such as fear, allow us to sort out this information and make sense of it. To continue with the warehouse analogy, feelings are like someone standing in the warehouse directing us to the information most pertinent to our situation. Fear advises us that it is necessary to proceed with caution, but also alerts us that there may be tremendous gain if we proceed.

Fear is also necessary in the formation of direction. It is my deep conviction that a life without direction is not worth living. In my opinion, all great leaders are deeply in touch with themselves and their inner direction. If you want to live a life with direction, the source of that vision must come from deep within you. It must be the very essence of you. Setting this vision in motion requires tremendous courage. It is an inherently scary, vulnerable thing to place your vision on display for the world to see. In my opinion, if you are not afraid, you are not really living. I also believe that fear is the element that crystallizes vision. Fear is the fire that turns the clay of your life into porcelain. If you are courageous and face the fire you take on incredible beauty. If you run from your fear you turn to dust. If you want to actualize the hero that lies within you, welcome it like a trusted friend. Embrace it and ask it to teach you all it has to offer, for it is only when you summon the courage to conquer your fears that you truly become yourself.

What is amazing is that once you give yourself over fully to this process, life is never again the same. Not only do you feel full alive and free, but all of the amazing gifts that reside within you come forth for the entire world to share. There is no way you can stop this process, nor would you want to. From that moment on everyone who comes in contact with you benefits from your journey. The world is truly a better place because you were afraid, yet did not turn away.

In closing, here is a wonderful piece from Dan Millman on fear.

Fear is a wonderful servant, but a terrible master.

Like pain, it can alert and advise, but it may also cloud or limit your life.

Fear appears in many disguises, such as,

"I'm not really into doing that", or "Why bother", or "I can't".

You face fear every day - fear of failure, fear of rejection, even the fear of being your self.

Your fears are not walls, but hurdles.

Courage is not the absence of fear, but the conquering of it.