

The Fear Reflex

5 Ways to Overcome IT and Trust Your Imperfect Self

Introduction

Sally was late for the team building session. She stood shyly in the doorway to the gym just as the group leader was telling the new employees to break up into smaller clusters to start the next exercise. She scanned the room. There, on the furthest side of the gymnasium she saw a guy from her office. A guy she had wanted to talk to for months. A guy she had been too timid to approach. A guy who she liked but thought would never like her. A guy with an empty seat right next to him. She froze with fear. To her immediate left was an empty seat next to a woman she knew well. All she had to do was sit there and she would be part of a group. But Sally squelched the fear that had risen from her gut to her heart to her throat and took a step, then another, and walked across the room and said, "Is this seat taken?" "No, it's all yours. Hi, I'm Harry." Sally sat down. She had taken the first step in overcoming fear.

I heard this story from a patient who had been struggling with insecurities that had crippled her in almost every aspect of her life: Relationships, job advancement, trying new things or going to new places. Sally was afraid she was not good enough for a relationship, not smart enough or capable enough to advance in her career, would fail if she tried something new, and was not bold enough to have an adventure. Sally felt imperfect, and that meant the world would see her as imperfect as well. And it was this fear that had crippled her, freezing initiative, thwarting ambitions, draining desire and dulling her dreams.

Fear, like a blazing siren, can catapult us into action for the sake of life itself, just as "Run for your Life!!!!" or "Fire!!!" can clear a crowded area. But fear may also paralyze, trapping a person somewhere between flight and fight, frozen, unable to make a decision, unable to move or cross a gymnasium floor. The deer-in-the-headlights response to fear may clearly lead to unsuccessful results, and yet can happen in response to real and present danger. At the same time, imagined fears can grip the human psyche as strongly as a bears embrace. Be it real, imagined, immediate, or anticipated, fear, and our response to it, is central to our survival, our success, and our ability to enjoy both.

Our fears can be nameless, an emotion with no apparent source. Fear can be unconscious, drawing us deep into the dark jungle of our evolutionary heritage, irrational and relentless. Fear can be truly an unjustified terror based more on what we imagine than what is really occurring. And it is this imaginary danger that paralyzes us, holding us back from advancing in our careers, relationships, and the joy and amazement of simply being alive.

Vestiges of fear have been inherited from one generation to the next, through millions of years of evolution. As if we still lived in a jungle protecting our nest, our fear impulse comes from the same part of our brain- the limbic system- that once reacted to and protected us from a saber-tooth tiger or a venomous snake or a marauding member of a competing clan plotting to kill or rob us. As much as humans have evolved over tens of thousands of years, fear has stayed with us to protect our survival and our species. Yet fear today paradoxically prevents us from really "living." But it doesn't have to.

Many still live in a world fraught with fear, dread, terror, and worry. Fear of failure. Fear of success. Fear of not having enough or of losing what you have. Fear of failing health or failing economies, fear of strangers, of being alone, commitment and abandonment. Fear of crossing the street, or of someone crossing the street in your direction. Fear of flying, driving, dying, thriving. Oh, and let's not forget fear of germs. You name it, our world is permeated with fears.

The very fabric of our daily lives is bombarded with terrifying events captured in the news and released like a maelstrom into our living-rooms, bedrooms, offices. We watch strangers at war. We hear about strangers harming other strangers with bombs or knives, guns or bricks. And when we are not watching we may be listening on the radio while driving in our cars. And when we are not listening, we may be reading about horrific assaults on the integrity of another human being in the newspaper or a home-page on the internet. We hear about entire nations threatening others, or the people of a nation attacking each other in that remarkable oxymoron called a civil war. It is amazing we venture outside the safety of our

homes at all into such a dangerous and deadly world. Our fear reflex seems to be on overdrive, as around every corner we may encounter our modern day equivalent of a saber-toothed tiger.

As a psychiatrist for more than 20 years, I have had unique access to what makes the human psyche tick, especially when it comes to fear. I work on a daily basis with people struggling to confront a myriad of fears. Disguised among those fears are the remnants of saber toothed tigers, snakes, or marauding tribes. But the essence of our modern fears can be distilled into this: Am I safe or will I be cast out, left alone, and have to fend for myself?

My patients have also taught me that within each of us lies the capacity to protect ourselves from deeply seated and irrational fears, and it is my wish to share these valuable insights with as many readers as possible.

In this book we'll explore the underlying sources of fear as part of our modern day world, a heritage from our pre-verbal history. Fear stems from our inherent desire to survive, and instills in us a growing caution, one that slowly increases as our brains shift from the infant impulse to the adult anticipation. But ultimately fear is the result of thinking our impulses and actions, or those of others, will result in harm. Like a driver on a road, we slow down at a caution sign, but stay immobile at a stop sign red with the symbol of danger. We are paralyzed by fear, and the anticipation that our impulses will transform us into a person of lesser value and all the risk that entails.

As you progress through the five steps of the book, Tiny Terrors, Rapid Response, Universally Unique, Social Security, and Traversing Together, I will show you how to reframe and control your fear through the I-M Approach. You will learn a new way of perceiving yourself and others, one which recognizes that each of us is simply doing the best we can in response to the influence of the world around us, and the world within us.

The I-M Approach

This treatment philosophy and concept evolved after many years of seeing the current approach to various behavioral treatments fail miserably, not because of the technique, but because we put a label on people and call them "sick". Most psychological teachings say that "pathology" or the study of disease is the key to helping people. We are taught to assume that a person is "broken" and needs to be fixed so they can do better.

For years, Sally had seen herself through this lens: wondering, "What is wrong with me" feeling broken and questioning her worth. . But as Sally began to understand, adopt and then use the I-M Approach, instead of seeing herself as inadequate, she could recognize herself at an I-M. Appreciating herself in this healthy context, Sally enabled herself to walk across the room and meet Harry. Sally knew that the fear she felt that rose from her stomach to her heart and to her throat was the best she could do at that moment. But she did not like it or want to let it guide her actions. Even if this fear response, one that compelled her to acquiesce into silent safety was her I-M she held herself responsible for it, and taking that responsibility gave her power to make a conscious decision and exercise control of her life. She respected that her fear was the best she could do at that moment, but then made a choice to move to a different I-M and walked across the room.

Fear is based on the idea that we are not good enough, not strong enough, not valuable enough. Fear is bred through a primitive worry that at any time we may be vulnerable to attack and not be able to fend off danger. Fear makes us want to run away or not do anything at all. Adopting the I-M Approach changes all of that. Of course you are not inadequate: you are at an I-M, by definition a "current maximum potential." At this moment in time, "current", you are doing the best you can, "maximum", but with the "potential" to change in the very next second. This does not mean that your current I-M is the best you will ever do, but that no one chooses to do worse than their I-M.

The I-M Approach challenges the whole idea that we are inadequate, are not doing the best we can, and need to do better. By changing the lens through which we see our self and others. the I-M Approach replaces fear with trust, a belief in our "imperfect" self and others based on the view that we are all doing

the best we can at this and every moment in time with the potential to change from second to second in response to our internal and external environments. Change the environment, change the response.