



How Do You Handle Fear?

BY JANET BICKEL, MA

If courage is not a part of your repertoire, it's unlikely you are advancing important causes.... When people are unable to stand up for what they believe in because they fear they'll be in harm's way, that is exactly where they have placed themselves. —Kathleen Reardon

Until we enter boldly into the fears we most want to avoid, those fears will dominate our lives.

—Parker Palmer

These days, to be alive is to have an anxiety disorder. Tectonic plates are shifting such that budget cuts, layoffs, hiring freezes, and program eliminations are affecting almost every sector and family. The message is: Do even more with even less of everything but paperwork. Many academic clinicians will have to keep putting in more hours than is healthy. Investigators are grappling with ever more competition and with funding processes that seem designed to elicit fear and frustration.

The economic downturn and increasing levels of unpredictability pile onto the old standbys: fear of insignificance, of inadequacy, of vulnerability, of conflict, of being controlled; fears that you will lose what you have or not get what you deserve. Even though they are well-positioned, many high achievers have an intense fear of failure, of others drawing negative conclusions about their worth, of anything interfering with their progress.

This article is about preventing fear from getting in your way. Our fears spotlight our values; turning toward what we want may well evoke fear. And because threats trigger the limbic system, we cannot prevent the body-mind from reacting. But as we bring what's happening into awareness, we can examine the "threat" and choose a mature response.

Increasing Self-Awareness

When conditions are favorable, even unreflective persons can function fairly well.

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But in times like these, people tend to cling to what they have and know, further limiting themselves. Growth depends on self-awareness.

Moving from feeling constricted to responding more effectively begins with identifying uncomfortable emotions and limiting beliefs. Since fears function like handcuffs, why aren't we better at this? Because our "stories" about our own righteousness function like internal earplugs. Because anxiety disguises itself, for instance, as anger or lethargy. Because we distract ourselves from this responsibility with more work or substance abuse. Because the internal saboteur (or "committee") prefers the status quo, so just when we've summoned the will to act, this saboteur says "it doesn't matter anyway."

There is, therefore, no substitute for the work of pausing and investigating your own responses. The most obvious clues are visceral. Next time your heart starts racing or your skin itches in response to a challenge or a person, ask yourself why

automatically over- or under-function in particular ways. Knowledge of such tendencies is critical to professional development; consider that development entails a "de-enveloping," that is, an opening up from our familiar envelopes. What are you doing or not doing that contributes to your stress?

Do You Under-Function?

A tendency to retreat in the face of anxiety often manifests as risk- and conflict-avoidance. If this applies to you, here are some points to consider:

- ❖ Pessimism is infectious. You are dampening others' enthusiasm and creativity as well as your own.
- ❖ Vision and risk can't be separated. If you have ideas to implement, a mission that you're committed to, then you must take risks to realize them.
- ❖ Risk or be risked upon. You're either at the table or on the menu. The faster the pace of change and the more competition for opportunities, the truer this is. Because they are overlooking opportunities to experiment and to grow, those who seek security are actually endangering themselves. Genuine security is an "inside job" dependent on self-knowledge, skills, and integrity.

How does one know which risks to take? Whether in the business or interpersonal

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you're reacting so strongly. Curiosity about the discomfort helps shift the focus from the past to the present and the emotional charge from vulnerable to self-empowering. Writing down what you are noticing—and, better yet, discussing it with a supportive colleague or coach—speeds insight.

Everyone has characteristic stress responses. To dampen anxiety, we tend to

realm, the "right" risks are deliberate and rich with meaning for you—that is, risks on behalf of your goals and values. Good decisions emerge from examining pertinent data that help you to assess possible outcomes and to size up the tradeoffs of acting versus not acting. Self-efficacy—that is, confidence that you can achieve your goals—also is key.

Throughout history, cultures have decreed that women be protected from risk. Another disadvantage that women experience here is that they tend to underestimate their abilities (whereas males overestimate theirs); also relevant is that women (and girls) receive less recognition for their achievements. So it is no wonder that risk-taking tends to come less naturally to women.

If you tend to under-function, here are a few suggestions:

- ❖ Be aware of your tendencies to underestimate yourself and to focus on the downsides. Seek the input of colleagues who approach risks and conflicts optimistically and effectively.
- ❖ Reflect on your experiences with taking and avoiding risks—for example, in what situations do you tend to play it too safe? Review your stories and insights with a friend; perhaps you can engage a learning partner who also seeks to grow in this direction.
- ❖ Expanding these capacities requires a conscious effort to tolerate increasing amounts of anxiety, so experiment with stretching the boundaries of what feels “safe.”
- ❖ Where is your sense of humor? If you fall on your face, at least you’re facing in the right direction!

Or Do You Over-Function?

In high achievers, over-functioning often takes the form of perfectionism. Like a faulty control mechanism, a perfectionist’s standards of excellence are so high and so deeply internalized that “good enough” rarely suffices. Ignoring the law of diminishing returns, these people keep single-mindedly driving toward an ideal. And even when they achieve great work, they judge themselves more harshly than anyone else—and this further drains energy and optimism.

Setting a high bar on an enormous range of skill, medical training encourages over-functioning. To be sure, some endeavors require the utmost attention to detail. But with regard to relationships and to leadership responsibilities, the perfect is the enemy of the good, and no amount of genius can overcome too much attention to detail. To individuals who are more relaxed or have greater inner security, perfectionism



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looks compulsive, controlling, micro-managing.

Originating in self-doubt, perfectionism is the opposite of risk taking. Dwelling on the mundane and overemphasizing details helps keep at bay the anxiety that accompanies change and taking full responsibility for oneself. So women also seem more prone to self-limiting perfectionism. Another contributing factor here is the extra scrutiny of “surplus visibility”—that is, women often feel they must be perfect in order to succeed—and, indeed, in traditionally male fields they are held to higher standards than men.

If you tend to over-function, here are a few recommendations:

- ❖ Talk back to that unreasonable inner critic. Severe self-judgment causes unnecessary suffering and saps confidence and courage.
- ❖ Don’t fight the messiness of life. Become more selective: What 20% *needs* to be “perfect”? What really counts?
- ❖ Limit the amount of time you allow for activities in which you over-function.
- ❖ Develop more accurate points of reference. Ask trusted colleagues and direct reports for feedback—for instance, “What do I do too much of? Not enough of?” Partner with a colleague or coach who can help you interpret and incorporate the feedback.

What Needs Adjusting?

To achieve your potential and to live your values with greater ease, what might you do differently?

- ❖ Adjusting to new realities probably means simplifying and scaling back in some areas.
- ❖ What do you usually focus on? If it’s on what you don’t have or what’s wrong (the trance of scarcity), pay more attention to what’s working well and to what you want to create.
- ❖ When faced with a new challenge, observe your response. Do you withdraw, lose trust in yourself and others, exaggerate the difficulty, or launch prematurely into action? Often our first response is counterproductive. Give yourself time to explore, to discover connections with what you already know. Consider with whom you can share your questions. Remain open and receptive.
- ❖ Because career momentum is not the force it used to be, traditional images (for instance, a steady climb toward more authority and income) are outdated. Remember that success and failure are largely self-defined.
- ❖ Be realistic. The key to resilience is respecting rather than fighting human limitations.
- ❖ Even though tradeoffs will be necessary, follow your strengths and do what you enjoy as much as possible. The best predictor of productivity is passion, and imaginatively engaging with what you do (also known as *play*) expands you.
- ❖ We’re all in this together—in the air we breathe and the cultures we create. Human beings are highly permeable; as we mimic the neural firings of those around us, emotions are contagious. Just by smiling and expressing appreciation to others, you help to counteract your own and others’ fears. ❖

Resources

- ❖ Austin L. *What’s Holding You Back? Eight Critical Choices for Women’s Success*. Basics Books, 2000.
- ❖ Waldroop J, Butler T. *Maximum Success: Changing the 12 Behavior Patterns that Keep You from Getting Ahead*. Doubleday, 2000.