

The Loudest Guest

What's in it for me? Learn how to control and chase your fear.

Fear is at your party again. He's loud and demanding, the center of attention. He's convincing too, telling you what will go wrong, how you'll fail. He's all you can focus on. Everyone experiences fear. But what is it and what purpose does it serve? It's actually there to protect you and, in the right balance, it limits your risk exposure. But when fear is in control, it can stop you from enjoying your life. These blinks will help you identify your fear and its effects. You'll learn how to use fear to your advantage, gain control, and get more of what you want out of life. Don't let fear be the loudest guest at your party! Advice: If reading these blinks makes you feel you need extra support, seek the advice of your doctor who will be able to recommend what you do next. Sometimes a specialist is needed. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to recognize and understand your fear; why you need to separate your fear from your self; and how you can experiment to overcome your fear.

Change the role of fear from controlling to commentating on your life.

Fear is good for you. Yes, really. It's essential for keeping you out of harm's way, and stops you from being physically or emotionally hurt. It makes you look before you leap. And it helps you identify mistakes before you even make them. A healthy dose of fear gives you the motivation to achieve things you otherwise wouldn't. Think about the nerves that pushed you to study before a big test, or practice hard before a big game. When you sense fear, your sympathetic nervous system is triggered. Your amygdala - a small almond-shaped area of the brain - signals your hypothalamus - another brain structure - to release hormones into your blood. These raise your blood pressure and blood sugar. Your muscles prepare for sudden and violent movement. Your heart and breathing rates increase. The cerebral part of your brain - the thinking part - switches off. You're optimally prepared for fight or flight. This is the key message: Change the role of fear from controlling to commentating on your life. When fear controls you, it can become so overwhelming that you even become afraid of fear itself. You might resort to alcohol, drugs, and avoidance behaviors to reduce its effects. You become self-critical, hate your fear, and ultimately become ashamed of it and your other feelings. When fear directs you, it helps you to identify opportunities and warns you about risks. But it can overdo this, and you find yourself overthinking outcomes and resort to doing only the predictable. You become full of self-doubt and choose comfort over challenge. You're more in control when fear acts as an advisor. But don't hand over too much power or it'll tell you its thoughts about everything - judging you and pointing out your mistakes and failures. Your self-belief can become eroded and you lose confidence in your decision-making. But fear needn't have such a hold over you. When fear simply becomes a commentator, you can decide whether to heed its advice or not. Fear should be one among equals with your other emotions - there to be called upon when it suits your purposes. Don't lose your fear, just learn to control it and turn the volume down when you need to. In the next six blinks, you'll learn the six steps of a never-ending

cycle which you can use to control your fear.

Recognize and understand your fear.

When the author took up soccer, she faced many fears: Would she be safe? Would she let the side down? Would she look unattractive? Would she be too unfit? Would she fail? Fear wanted to save her all this embarrassment and possible injury. Had she listened, she'd never have experienced the joy of scoring a goal while her children watched, or celebrated after a match with her husband and teammates. She still considers herself the worst in the team but, at the end of the season, she received the coach's award trophy. That trophy reminds her of the rewards of controlling her fears. Here's the key message: Recognize and understand your fear. The first step in understanding your fear is to understand your goals. Make a list of what you want to achieve in terms of your health, wealth, love, family, and other aspects of your life. You can even draw up a 30-day, 90-day, 3-year, or 10-year plan. Then, think about what fear is telling you about achieving each of your goals. Next, get to know what actually triggers your fear – people, places, times, and spaces. Specifically, think about physical, social, and emotional risks, and your fear of the unknown and of failure. What are the physical symptoms you experience? Often they're the same regardless of when or why you experience fear. And how do you react before, during, and after being triggered? Perhaps you avoid the situation you're afraid of. Fear saves you from whatever the risk is. But this is only a short-term fix – your real problem, the fear, remains. Avoidance prevents you from discovering whether the risk is real, and robs you of a learning experience. When you know how, when, and why you experience fear, you become more conscious of your behavior, and can begin to understand how it contributes to any situation. By controlling yourself, you can start to take control. To get closer to understanding your fear, try spending more time with yourself – meditating, for example, or simply being alone with a cup of tea. Writing down your thoughts will help you clarify them and highlight any repeated messages. It'll also help you change your relationship with your feelings. Recognizing your fear and understanding how it both helps and hinders you in achieving your goals, puts you in a better position to control it.

Have some self-compassion and welcome fear to the party.

The development of the human brain over the last two million years has been remarkable. Not only do our brains control our fine motor skills, but they also create, decide, communicate, control emotions, remember, plan, prioritize, think abstractly – the list goes on and on. Yet, despite all this, the primitive core of our brains – which includes the seat of our fear response – hasn't changed much: it's still pretty similar to that of a lizard. The key message here is: Have some self-compassion and welcome fear to the party. The truth is, that primitive response has served us well. It kept our ancestors safe from a host of dangers, like hungry saber-toothed tigers or eating the wrong mushrooms. And nowadays it tells us to save children from impending disasters and not to step out into traffic. Fear keeps us safe. But the problem is that fear can be triggered simply by things that feel different. It might tell us to exclude people who don't share our views or values, for example. This can work to maintain societal divides. We're also instinctively change-averse even when change might be better. Fear tries to protect us from risks, favoring predictability over an unknown future. We can't simply

berate ourselves for feeling this way. Nor can we block or deny our fear. Do that, and it just shouts louder. Instead, the more rational part of our brains must soothe or lessen the intensity of our fear. If we want to develop a healthy relationship with it, we need to treat it with respect and compassion. And in doing so, we'll ultimately be caring for ourselves. Other difficult feelings need the same treatment. Anger, for example, can give you the strength to get through a problem and to stand up for yourself, but can easily be manipulated by fear. Ask yourself if any anger you feel is actually fueled by your fear. Feelings of guilt and shame stop you from straying from your moral values, but our fear can also hijack these to keep you stuck. And then there's self-criticism: it can help motivate you to find new ways of doing things. But, just as easily, it can leave you feeling like a complete failure or just not good enough. When you approach your difficult emotions with compassion and understanding, your self-compassion comes forward and self-criticism fades into the background – taking fear with it.

Separate your fear from your self.

Twenty-six-year-old Valeria's Olympic performance didn't go to plan. A year later, her professional career was over. She started work and got on with her life, but felt like it was one big game of catch-up. Promotion came quickly and she found herself part of an executive team. But then her fear took hold: What if she wasn't ready? What if she let people down? What if . . . ? Flashbacks to her training and negative advice she was given pushed her even harder. Her guilt for her disappointing Olympic performance and how she'd let people down meant she simply couldn't fail as an executive. Fear drove her to take on more and more. It became too much. Eventually – exhausted, sad, and overwhelmed – she burned out. The key message? Separate your fear from your self. We're all the sum of our previous experiences and, as a consequence, we filter out anything that doesn't conform with our core beliefs. A whole raft of biases makes it difficult for us to change and our core beliefs frequently become "truths." In the same way, our early experiences of fear are difficult to change. Try this reflection on your own life. Start by drawing a horizontal line on a blank page, with your date of birth at one end and today at the other. Mark it out into 5-year chunks. Above the line, write down the important events that happened in each period. Below the line, comment on how these events have shaped your fear. Take as long as you need. Next, look at your timeline as if you're an outsider. Do you see any patterns or themes? Are there clear episodes related to fear? Are there stories that continue from childhood to the present day? Are these truths? Externalizing your own story allows you to examine how fear uses the past to tell you about now rather than evaluating now from a less biased viewpoint. If you understand this, you can begin to separate fear's message from the fear itself. And you'll stay in the present, focusing on what you want rather than listening to fear. And Valeria? Well, she recognized that her story was just that – a story. It wasn't the truth. Now, she's learned not to do everything fear tells her to. She looks for balance, is kinder to herself, and creates boundaries around her performance. They're not things she finds easy, but they're helping her build a new story.

Evaluate your fear and identify its key messages.

Damian worked for a large government agency that went through some reorganization. He didn't adapt well and others saw him as a "blocker" of change. Fear told him not to

try because he'd fail. He wouldn't change easily. That it was time for him to leave because he added no value to this new world. Working with a coach, he evaluated what fear was telling him and asked himself whether the thoughts were true, and whether they were useful. This helped him change his way of thinking. He realized that if he didn't try he'd surely fail. That, yes, he didn't change easily, but that he could do it. And that he wanted to be part of the new organization and by getting involved he'd definitely add value. The key message here is: Evaluate your fear and identify its key messages. Fear deserves attention as long as it's useful. But you need to evaluate it in order to understand what to take note of, and what to ignore. Earlier, you observed what triggers your fear – people, places, times, and spaces. When this happens, you also experience unconscious Fear Automatic Thoughts, or FATs. You can get closer to your fear if you start to recognize these and evaluate whether it's just fear talking. Ask yourself whether these FATs are needed, are of value, or can be ignored. Think of a time when you felt fear and try to write down what you were thinking – your FATs. Then ask yourself whether you have any evidence that your thoughts were true and whether there's evidence to suggest they weren't. Do the FATs relate to the specific situation or to the past? How would your best friend react to them? By evaluating your FATs in this way, you can also begin to develop alternatives. If you evaluate a FAT and find that it is true or useful, try reframing it in a positive light. For example, if you think everyone will know you're nervous when you make a presentation, try framing it as, I'm going to connect really well with the audience. You can also evaluate your core fear beliefs in the same way. Although this may take time, you may eventually be able to substitute beliefs like I'm a failure into Sometimes I fail, and sometimes I succeed.

Decide to be courageous, and create a contract with your fear.

Imagine that you no longer listen to your fear and tomorrow you suddenly find yourself more courageous. How would your day begin differently from today? How would people react to the new you? What would they see in you that makes them realize you're more courageous? How does this "new you" think? And what could you now achieve? This is the key message: Decide to be courageous, and create a contract with your fear. Your goals may seem out of reach, but if you could make fear-free decisions you could probably achieve much more. Take some time to reflect on your goals in various aspects of your life and write them down. What are your work goals? Perhaps you see yourself in the top job one day. Do you have social goals? Maybe you'd like more friends or deeper relationships. What about fun goals like surfing Maui or trekking in the Amazon – or even something a little less dangerous, like baking your own bread? What are your well-being goals – eating three helpings of fruit per day or making sure you're doing some movement every day, for example. Add in your financial goals – maybe investing an amount of money; and your learning goals – like enrolling in a photography course, or learning a new language. Make sure each goal you want to concentrate on is SMART – that is, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-sensitive. Think about what fear says about them. Ask yourself how your goals would be different if fear wasn't involved. Of course, fear doesn't want you to risk change, but if you want to move forward and be courageous there has to be some discomfort. But you can decide to accept that discomfort and move forward. Rose was having difficulties in her relationship. Fear wanted her to avoid confrontation and the hard work of changes necessary to save it. Fear told her to walk away. But she decided to be courageous and stay – to work through the pain and rejection. She decided to overcome her fears and

make her decisions based on what she wanted – a deep and meaningful relationship. You can even write a contract with your fear – to approach it and experience discomfort rather than opting for avoidance and comfort. Sign and date it. You could even have someone witness it.

Overcome your fear through experimentation.

The author's first-ever patient was arachnophobic – she had an intense fear of spiders. It was summer, yet she turned up at the clinic dressed in a waterproof coat with the hood up, drawstrings pulled tight, and her tracksuit pants tucked into her rubber boots. She felt more comfortable dressed this way to avoid any chance of meeting a spider. She also repeatedly sprayed her house. It was all pretty effective – she didn't meet any spiders. The patient believed that it was her actions that prevented spiders from running up her legs and ending up in her mouth. She was convinced she'd been saved by listening to her fear and acting accordingly. Here's the key message: Overcome your fear through experimentation. Fear is good at convincing us that it's saved us. And, in doing so, it becomes stronger. But the good news is we can flex our choice muscles and decide not to listen to every choice fear makes for us. When we say no, we loosen fear's grip. We need to experiment to test the truth in fear's choices. But we need an experiment where we feel safe, something that our fear can tolerate. With the author's patient, treatment started slowly – the first step was being able to smile at a hand-drawn picture of a spider. Once she was able to do that, experimentation continued with fewer protective clothes, less spraying of poison at home, more outside activities, and making decisions of her own. Eventually, she felt comfortable enough to brush her cheek across the back of a big hairy spider crawling up her arm! When you choose a behavior that fear doesn't like, you put yourself in the driver's seat. Gradually increasing the discomfort you feel allows you to countermand fear's choices. To do this, draw up a plan with steps 1 to 10 – where you are now is 1, and where you want to be is 10. Fill in the gaps making each step a little more challenging than the last. Overcoming your discomfort each time will bring more and more confidence. Reduce the discomfort of your fear by calling on gratitude, forgiveness, and hope. Be grateful for the opportunity to challenge yourself. Approach social-risk situations from a position of forgiveness. And look to the future with optimism and hope. As you take control, fear may move the goalposts. But now that you know how to understand and control fear, you can go to the beginning of the cycle and start again. Make friends with fear and use it to drive yourself to be a better you.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Fear is a guest at your party. By first recognizing and understanding your fear, separating yourself from it, evaluating its truths, creating a contract with it, and experimenting, you can turn fear into a commentating rather than controlling voice. You don't want to exclude fear from your party, but you can make it a little less loud. This is your party, and now you know exactly what to do! actionable advice: Get feedback from others. Fear doesn't want you to do this, of course, but imagine the helpful feedback you could get from others. Other people see you in a different light from the way you see yourself. They probably know more about you than you think, and perhaps better than you do yourself. Asking them

for information about how they see you gives you an opportunity to grow and work toward being a better person. Don't let fear hold you back.