



Understanding Fear in the Workplace

We experience fear when faced with actual or perceived physical or psychological threats. For some people, fear can feel like extreme nervousness, anxiety, or an intense feeling of “being stressed”. There tends to be a strong physiological component to fear (as fear prepares our body for an adaptive, “fight, flight or freeze” response). Common physical symptoms can include muscle tension (especially in neck and shoulder areas), rapid breathing, increased heart rate, clammy skin, sweatiness, pale or flushed face, shakiness, dizziness and nausea.

Fearful thoughts tend to be focused on predictions of harm, danger or other negative outcomes to ourselves or those we care about. Work responsibilities and duties can be a common motivator of fear. For example, we may have fearful or nervous thoughts about failing to meet a work deadline, about our job security, or about being publicly embarrassed during a presentation. This can be especially difficult for managers, who must monitor not only their own performance, but also that of workers. Fear can affect our concentration, such that we become preoccupied by a potential threat, rather than focusing on our immediate responsibilities. Fear can also lead us to become hyper-alert to cues in our environment that feed or reinforce our fearful thoughts (e.g., noticing signs of non-compliance among workers when we believe they don’t respect our authority).

A natural and common reaction to fear is a strong desire to avoid or escape the situation causing the fear. This can lead us to withdraw from our responsibilities. Typically, we feel a temporary sense of relief when we avoid a fearful situation. For example, consider a person who has postponed a presentation because he feels nervous speaking in front of people. He likely feels relieved by the postponement, temporarily safe from the possibility of public embarrassment. By avoiding the situation, however, he is reinforcing his fear that doing the presentation is dangerous in some way. Through a habit of avoidance (e.g., delegating unpleasant tasks, pushing back deadlines, calling in sick), his fear of speaking in public likely increases in intensity. Ironically, *avoidance of things that make us fearful leads to an increase in fear in the long run*. It is desirable, therefore, to learn to identify avoidance behaviours and try to curb them.

Below are common situations in which fearful thoughts can lead to avoidance. Pay attention to how traits such as catastrophic thinking, underestimating our own abilities, and “mind-reading” can result in greater fear. Notice how actions could or would be different if the thoughts were different.

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| Situation | Fear-Provoking Thoughts | Fear-Driven Actions | Fear-Moderating Thoughts |
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| A manager is about to train workers on a task that she is not highly comfortable with herself. | <i>"I'll never pull it off. I don't have a clue what I'm doing. I'm going to be completely humiliated."</i> (catastrophic thinking) | Postpone the training date, telling workers you are "too busy" to train at this point. Look for another manager to co-lead the training. | <i>"The best thing I can do is let others know I'm not an expert on this task but that I'll do my best and get further information if I'm unclear about anything."</i> |
| A manager needs to fire a worker who she knows has financial hardships. | <i>"I'm going to put him on the streets. I will be seen as a jerk by everyone at the office."</i> (mind-reading) | Delay meeting with the worker, try to think of alternatives to firing them. | <i>"This is one of the hardest parts of my job. It will never feel easy, but it's something that has to be done for the benefit of our entire team."</i> |
| A manager has just joined a large company and will be managing people older than he is. | <i>"I'm just a kid."</i> (underestimating self) Mental image of himself as a small person with others glaring down on him. <i>"They will find out that I'm actually not a real manager and will laugh at me."</i> (irrational assumptions) | Try to be extra friendly to gain approval. Try to appear older through dress and demeanour. | <i>"I'm young and it may be more challenging for me, as not everyone will accept me, but there's a reason I was selected for this position and I have to trust that. I can't control other people's judgments."</i> |

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| A manager needs to make a presentation. This has never been his strength. | Mental image of being laughed at during school presentations, thinking: <i>"I'm going to completely bomb the presentation. They're going to think that I sound stupid and I will lose credibility as a manager."</i> | Delegate the task to a worker who seems more comfortable with public speaking. | <i>"As hard as the presentations always feel, I get through them...they're definitely not my strength, but it's never as awful as I think it will be."</i> |
| A manager receives an email from HR indicating that a worker has made a complaint against her and that there will be an inquiry. | <i>"I must have said or done something wrong without realizing it. I'm going to be demoted. My reputation is going down the drain."</i> | Stop doing the tasks at hand. Think about past actions that might have caused the complaint. Hide in your office. | <i>"I have to trust I've handled things to the best of my ability. I need to get all the information before I react."</i> |
| A manager has misplaced an important confidential client file. | <i>"That is so irresponsible of me. I'm losing my mind. I can't handle this job. I will probably get fired over this."</i> | Hide the fact that the file is lost. | <i>"I'm not perfect. I'll do my best to locate the file in time and apologize if I need to. The client knows I am usually well prepared."</i> |

From these examples, we see that fear can range from slight nervousness to sheer panic. Sometimes fear can propel us to act in constructive ways. For example, it motivates us to spend extra time preparing for a presentation. Or, fear can move us to prioritize certain things, like looking for an important file. Other times, however, fear can prevent us from doing what we need to do. We begin to avoid things because we feel we are unable to face them. Other times, we become so focused on the source of fear that we neglect everything else, as in the example of the manager who dwells on the worker's complaint instead of continuing with daily responsibilities. Recognizing fear and helpful and unhelpful ways of reacting can allow us to make better decisions when we find ourselves in emotionally intense situations.