

Situational vs. Psychological Fear

Situational Fear. If our bodies didn't have a natural stress response we would be dead. Actually, our ancestors would have died and we never would have been born at all. Our fight-or-flight response was designed to save our cave-dwelling ancestors from an untimely death in the jaws of a saber-toothed predator or other danger. Our bodies increase our heart rate and send a flood of adrenalin and cortisol throughout our bodies, getting oxygen to the brain and energy to the muscles. This “fear response” provides us an instinctive form of self-protection, allowing us to flee dangerous situations or muster the strength to defend ourselves. *This is situational fear—fear that is triggered by an immediate threat in our current situation.*

It's true that instinctual fear is healthy. It keeps us safe. But many people give fear too much merit—they believe that by living in a state of fear they're somehow protecting themselves and their loved ones. But unless you're under immediate threat, fear is completely unnecessary. You don't need fear to avoid danger – just a minimum of intelligence and common sense. For example, the reason you don't put your hand in the fire is not because of fear. It's because you know that you'll get burned. When a child touches a hot stove and gets burned, they learn that fire equals pain. They learn to avoid touching fire. There is no fear involved.

Now, as an adult this person may be in a home that catches fire—and it would be natural for them to become fearful. The resulting fight or flight response would help them quickly and safely exit the burning building. However, if this person, as a child or an adult, develops a “fear of fire”—meaning when they think about fire they become frightened—they are experiencing psychological fear, not real fear.

Psychological fear is divorced from any concrete and true immediate danger. It is always fear of something that might happen.

The problem is that while you can always cope with the present moment, you cannot cope with something that is only in your imagination. This is the reason many people report that the thing they were afraid of, when they finally actually experienced it, wasn't “as bad as they expected”.

Here is an example of how real fear is different than psychological fear and why the latter is harder to deal with. If you were driving and notice out of the corner of your eye that a car is about to hit you, your body responds and you enter the fear response. The car swerves and danger is diverted. If this has ever happened to you, immediately after the situation you likely noticed your heart was beating in your chest and your breathing was heavy. You may have noticed your palms were clammy or that you felt shaky. But, since it's over, your mind says “it's okay now” and your body begins to calm down. Within a couple minutes you're back to normal.

This is because the chemicals and hormones and heart rate we experience in order to save our lives are supposed to return to normal after our Neanderthal is sitting around the cave fire telling his buddies about his narrow miss. But in the modern world our bodies don't normalize because our stress isn't caused by threat of death. For us, everything looks like a toothed predator! Our

stress is constant! Overbearing bosses, tight schedules, nagging children, distant spouses, and empty hearts put many of us in a state of chronic worry, anxiety and stress.

Our habit of worrying puts us on edge. Then, a stressful situation can agitate us further, adding to the tension we already had and causing physiological reactions, such as increased heart rate, high blood pressure. If we continue to focus on the “problem” causing our state of anxiety, it gets worse. We feel out of control. Our body fully enters the state of fight or flight. And, here’s the key... because there is no REAL THREAT happening our mind cannot say “here is the danger and this is what you can do to protect yourself.” And because it’s not real, your mind cannot stop it and then say “it’s over, I’m okay now.” The mind, who is trying to protect you, then looks at this fear response and thinks “there must be something wrong.” It escalates the situation and you begin to panic. You think there’s something wrong with you. You may even think you’re dying. You’re under attack, but the assailant is YOU.

This is psychological fear, and although the experience is very real, what you are afraid of is imaginary. You are fighting a battle with a phantom shadow.

The best way to win this battle with psychological fear is to stop it before it starts. Remind yourself that it’s not real and that you have the power to stop yourself from spiraling into a state of fear. Catch yourself when you’re feeling stressed, uncertain or anxious and take action to change your situation, environment or mental focus to help you de-escalate your emotional state.

The rest of this course is dedicated to providing techniques for emotional self-control to avoid and de-escalate anxiety and fear.