

## **Fear Can Be a Good Thing**

Halloween has always been my favorite holiday. I love everything about it: fall weather, the costumes, decorations, pumpkin carving and candy. For one night a year, the neighborhood collectively engages in some fun together. But I think the real appeal of Halloween is the idea of being scared. It may sound far-fetched, but it actually gives us an opportunity to explore fear in a healthy way. We approach it, expect it, but know there isn't any real danger. The next morning, it's over, and we are not left with any lingering emotions, but we learn what scares us and why.

Fear is one of our trickiest emotions. Understanding it as a good thing is very difficult for most of us. What could possibly be good about feeling scared? People who are perpetual thrill seekers know. Fear releases adrenaline and creates in us a heightened feeling. People can perform incredible feats of strength and heroism in the face of fear. It alerts us to danger and causes a physical protective reaction so we can cope. Fear is wired in to protect us so that we can be aware of when we are in danger both physically and emotionally. Fear is really our friend.

Our problem comes in confusing the true emotion of fear with anxiety. Real fear usually only lasts for a period of time. When the danger is resolved, the fear should leave. Anxiety is prolonged fear. It comes into our lives when we start fearing the fear instead of living in the reality of today. For example, if I am in a terrible car accident, I would naturally experience the fear of that event while it is happening, and it would alert me to react. But if I forever refuse to get in a car because of what might happen; my normal fear has become anxiety. It is affecting my ability to live a normal, productive life.

Anxiety is exacerbated by stress. Stress from life circumstances can cause us to start living in the past or the future, while ignoring the present. We continually process old situations that were emotionally scarring and then we project onto the future all of our worst-case scenarios.

Sometimes we justify that thinking as being practical or being a realist, but the truth is, no one can change the past or predict the future. Sometimes we think by "getting ahead of" any possible outcome, we can somehow change the way things go. But life is unpredictable, and we have no idea what tomorrow will hold. Anxiety and worry only create the illusion that we are in control while taking their toll on our long-term emotional well-being.

Ridding ourselves of anxiety requires a mental reworking. Depending on the severity of the anxiety, professional help from a therapist can often assist us in learning new ways of thinking. Overcoming anxiety is not as easy as letting go of the worry. Nor is it something we need to be high jacked by for the rest of our lives. We can walk ourselves daily through some mental exercises to help alleviate anxiety and to relearn a more productive way of thinking.

First, we need to ask ourselves what we are really worried about. For example, many of us have anxiety around public speaking, but what we are actually avoiding is being judged by our audience. So, our first task is to acknowledge the real worry: judgment and get to the heart of why that bothers us. We might be surprised. It's like picking up a lifeless rock, only to find that there are many living, breathing things making a home under there. Our emotional lives are a lot like that. They appear to be one thing on the surface but have a whole life of their own underneath.

Secondly, we need to decipher anxiety from real danger. Anxiety often makes our bodies think we are in danger, but we really are just uncomfortable. For example, we need to ask ourselves, "Will speaking in public actually harm me?" Most likely, the answer is no. So, it is not a real danger and therefore, not real fear. It is anxiety over what *might* happen, not what is really happening.

Third, we need to start looking at the reality. What is the chance the "things" that I am worrying about will happen? If they do happen, what can I do about the situation? (I might be able to do something or nothing) How much about this situation do I really control? (Since I only control myself, probably not as much as I think) What is the best thing that might happen or did happen? (Good things happen too!) What can I do about this situation today? What is my reality today?

When we start thinking about the reality of today, we find there is only so much we can really accomplish in one day. We start letting go and finding joy in the moment, while lessening our worries about things already done or things yet to come. Letting go of anxiety and worry frees us to be truly present with ourselves and others.