



A TIME TO HEAL

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Dealing with Fear

Two cognitive approaches to dealing with fear:

1. Fear Is Not The Enemy:

Remember, fear, or perhaps more accurately, activation of the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), is not necessarily the enemy. SNS activation is necessary for being sharp, competing, winning, getting something done, giving you that extra edge or oomph. A work presentation delivered without a bit of SNS will often be lack-lustre. A sprinter without adrenaline¹? Well!!

Dealing with fear should always include understanding and (dare I say) embracing it. Or as a dear friend used to say “turn fear into excitement”. The psych-babble for this might be ‘cognitively reframe’ the sensations. Simply – when you have any of the sensations that you know as “fear” – weak legs, dry mouth, racing heart, shallow breath, butterflies in your stomach – practice re-labelling them in your thoughts. “I’m activated and that helps my performance” rather than “I’m scared”.

2. Think Again:

Secondly, cognitions – thoughts – are a big part of fear, more for some people than others. So if your fear takes the form of negative thoughts or beliefs – e.g., “I’m going to fall apart”, “I can’t do this I’m going to fail”, “I’m going to lose my job” – try on the idea that this is only one *part* of yourself talking, and that there’s another part (and there always is) which is capable of challenging (kindly) the frightened part. For some it helps to assume that the frightened part is a child-like part. Your job is not to reassure the “child” with unconvincing platitudes though - kids are smart! I suggest three rough types of challenge.

¹ *One of the main SNS hormones.

Firstly, the “Colombo” – looking at the evidence.

Fear: “I’m going to fail!”

Colombo: “Well Ma’am I see from the records here that you had to take the same test a year ago and you passed just fine”.

Secondly, the “Nerdy Swiss Scientist Teacher” – re-explaining what’s going on.

Fear: “I’m going to fall apart”.

Scientist: “According to an up to date understanding of human physiology, you’re experiencing SNS activation which is an essential part of boosting performance.” [make sure to give the Scientist a good strong Swiss accent!]

Thirdly, the “Feisty Best Friend” – examining the consequences (AKA ‘Do I Look Bovered’).

Fear: “I’m going to lost my job”

FBF: “Well firstly Colombo and the Scientist suggest otherwise, but even if they’re wrong – would that really be the end of the world? If you look at the really big picture? I’m not saying it would be amazing, but I know you, and you’d get through it, you’ve got skills and a good employment record, and let’s face it, the job pisses you right off sometimes doesn’t it?!”

OR

Fear: “They’re judging me, and I’m going to look like such a failure. They’ll think I’m such an idiot and I’ll feel so ashamed.”²

FBF: “Well first of all (Scientist interrupts), most people judge themselves way more harshly than others judge them. And if we’ve always been harsh and judgemental with ourselves, we usually assume **falsely** that other people secretly think the same bad things about us. But ANYWAY (FBF) does it really matter if someone judges you and thinks you’re a failure? Is someone who thinks like that about you someone you want to have in your life? If someone said that about a good friend of yours, you wouldn’t believe it, and you’d stand up for them. Be your own friend here. We all have failures at times. Even painful ones. But we don’t die. And we learn. And new things happen that wouldn’t have happened otherwise. Let them judge! What counts is showing up and doing your best.”

² If you are particularly prone to thinking badly about yourself, or have a bias towards negative expectations, you would probably benefit from doing deeper work with a professional to investigate and uproot the reasons for this so that you can live more peacefully and with more joy.

It takes PRACTICE to be able to have these conversations with ourselves in real time. Don't expect it to be easy to start with. But if you are regularly experiencing fear thoughts, and especially if they are similar each time, try regularly sitting down when you have some time and writing out the fear thoughts you've had recently and then writing out the challenges. Or get a good friend to help you. Eventually you will develop a new reflex.

Getting Out of Pre-Historic Brain

Fight or Flight (we'll come back to this again later): we're all familiar with this expression these days. The bits of the human nervous system involved, including the brain, are evolutionarily ancient (and for some of us, they're personally ancient too!). They are designed for helping us avoid death. By saber-toothed tiger. Some of these bits work based on immediate input from the eyes. The information doesn't go through the thinking bits of the brain, it doesn't pass Go, it doesn't collect £200. Our reaction to the data is reflexive, because it needs to work fast when survival is at stake. Fortunately for most of us, most of the time, our personal survival is rarely ever at stake. It's a slight oversimplification, but I'll refer to the area of the brain involved as the back-brain. My clients also call it lizard brain, survival brain, pre-historic brain, cave-man brain, and instinct brain.

But where there is back brain, there is front brain (there's also mid-brain, but that's for another day). Front brain is new brain, modern brain, thinking thoughts brain. And by deliberately engaging in tasks that require "front brain" activity, we shift the pattern of brain activity *away* from lizard brain panicking. A top way of firing up the front brain would be engaging in a sorting activity like reorganizing bookshelves, working on an Excel spreadsheet (my nerdy favourite), or doing filing. Or else try cross-words, Su Do Ku, playing brain training games, or counting all the red cars that go past (now we know what our parents were playing at...).

Activating the Parasympathic Nervous System

Where there is Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Flop (playing dead) we're talking about the work of the SNS or "Sympathetic" Nervous System (yes, the name doesn't quite fit, I know).

The kindly twin to the SNS is the PNS – the champion of Relax, Rest, Recharge, Reset: the "Parasympathetic" Nervous System (maybe think of it like sending in the PARA-medics). The PNS is programmed to kick in once the tiger has gone, the coast is clear, and it's time to come off high alert.

Some of us go through periods of time where we seem to be somehow stuck in a fear setting, or fear is more easily triggered or "activated" than is "functional" or helpful and the PNS seems 'under-powered'. Some of us even live a large percentage of our lives like this unfortunately. Speaking both as a therapist and a client, I can't overestimate the

value of having professional support if this applies to you. And you have my great sympathy because I know both situations personally and only too well. I suffered what felt like endless and hellish panic attacks during two separate periods in my life, and I also identify as someone who has spent much of her life more easily activated than is functional and was eventually and very helpfully diagnosed with CPTSD.

If you are suffering, and despite your best self-assistance efforts and the support of friends / family / colleagues feel you need more help, I strongly advise you to find a qualified therapist through the NHS, the UKCP or the BACP (this will help ensure you find someone well trained and adhering to the highest ethical standards). You also may well want to consider medication if guided to by a well-informed GP / psychiatrist. Neither medication nor therapy need be life-long nor even long term, depending on your history.

Many well-trained therapists will now help their clients to take back some control of their own physiology, not just their thoughts and feelings, and will talk about learning to activate the PNS. The rest of this article contains some suggestions for ways to do this.

The first three suggestions all concern working with the in and out breath and are variations on a theme. They're listed in order of simplicity. All are best practiced sitting comfortably, both feet on the floor, upright but no need to try and achieve something Buddha like unless you're used to it. Just an alert comfy position. I would strongly recommend you have a clock nearby with an audible tick (just a basic travel clock is great, but not a digital one!).

Counting breaths

Start with a four-second breath cycle like this:

Breathe in for one, two, three, four

Breathe out for one, two, three, four

Repeat this cycle five or six times. The exact number doesn't matter. Then extend the pattern by one second; i.e., breathe in for one, two, three, four, five; breathe out for one, two, three, four, five. Again, repeat this cycle a few times, then add another second. Your rough aim is to get to 'eight in, eight out'. HOWEVER – it is really important not to strain. Strain = stress = SNS activation. So that won't help!

Variation 1 – with a pause

Some people find it more comfortable to insert a “turn around” pause between the in breath and the out breath, and then between the outbreath and the next in breath:

Breathe in 1–2–3-4

Pause

Breathe out 1-2-3-4

Pause

Breathe in 1-2-3-4

Or try “square breathing”

Breathe in for 1–2–3-4

Pause for 1-2-3-4

Breathe out for 1-2-3-4

Pause for 1-2-3-4

Variation 2 – longer outbreath

The idea here is that the in-breath is part of the activation sequence of the SNS – think of the sudden intake of breath when we’re shocked. It makes sense – we need extra oxygen to make an escape or fight. And if the in-breath is part of SNS activation, then the out-breath is part of PNS activation. And it’s PNS activation we’re after in managing fear. So have a go at doing the same breath counting exercise but like this:

Breathe in for 1-2-3-4

Breathe out for 1-2-3-4-5

Extend the count the same as outlined above, with the final aim being “in for 7, out for 8” or “in for 8, out for 9” depending on comfort / lung capacity. But again – no straining!

Variation 3 – coordinating with your heart beat

In this variation, also known as Coherent Heart Breathing, your counter is not the ticking clock but your own heart beat. I can usually feel my heart beating in my chest / solar plexus if I sit quietly and pay attention, or I can usually find my pulse in my neck, but not my wrist, but different people are different. Use exactly the same counting protocol as above, but count in time with your own natural rhythm. It’s important to understand that the heart doesn’t beat in strict “second-time”. It speeds and slows and speeds and slows in an a-rhythm that is healthy.

Other exercises

Windmill visualisation – as you sit and breathe, no counting needed, simply imagine there is a set of windmill sails going around clockwise and fast in your stomach and the job of your imagination is to slow them down until you can get them to rotate rhythmically and slowly in an anticlockwise direction.

Adding an “earth” breath – as you sit and breathe, either doing the Windmill visualisation or doing a counting exercise, try out breathing in and out through the nose only. This is thought by many practitioners to be particularly “grounding” – a breath that will bring us back down to earth.

Faster-EFT – I won’t attempt to explain F-EFT here, except to say that it is something we can do ourselves, that is a bit like acupuncture but without needles. In F-EFT we tap with our fingers on a small collection of points on the face and upper body. These points are associated with Chinese Medicine meridians to do with the activation of the PNS. F-EFT also requires a good strong out-breath, and additionally includes a cognitive or “thinking” element that can be very helpful. Robert Smith is the man to Google, and there is an absolute abundance of F-EFT YouTube videos which I used to “tap along” with during the worst of my panic attacks. Once proficient, you can even tap in public by tapping in your imagination. I definitely recommend anyone to investigate before dismissing this practice.

Certain body positions – I’m not a qualified personal training instructor, physician or yoga instructor. I’m just someone who’s learned a bit about physiology and who has been at times desperate to help herself manage fear. Some body positions are thought to be very helpful for activating the PNS. The one I find most soothing is “child pose” – a form of kneeling forward-curl where the forehead rests against the floor and the arms rest on the floor in front or down alongside the shins. Google “child pose” in the Images tab, or check out a small (non-gym-based) yoga class (Hatha Yoga is your best bet as there is a lot of focus in Hatha on breath work and it tends to be more peaceful) and ask your instructor to show you poses that will stimulate your PNS / a relaxation response.

I hope this helps – if you have any questions or are interested in having an assessment session because you’re looking for a therapist, please feel free to email or call me using the information provided on my Contact page.

With much love,

Chaire

