

5.11 Face Your Fear

Stand up to the things that scare you.

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Fear can distort our perceptions, making threats appear larger than they are. When we run from our fears, they grow, potentially overwhelming us. Only when we stand up to the things that scare us can we determine how great the dangers really are and respond accordingly.

At times, these fears may be relatively frivolous, such as a fear of heights that prevents us from going bungee jumping. On occasions when we do face something truly terrifying, however, such as a potentially fatal disease, overcoming our fear will enable us to make better decisions, such as choosing the right treatment options and sharing profound moments with family and friends.

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- Fear often masks important truths.
- When we confront what scares us, we grow emotionally and become more resilient.

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- Fear can be very convincing, and it's difficult to separate legitimate warnings from false caution.

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One way to think of fear is through this acronym: "False evidence appears real." In many cases, fear is the creation of our minds and bears little resemblance to the actual dangers of a situation.

A powerful way to challenge this false evidence is to present your mind with new evidence that counteracts it. This is the same principle parents use to convince their children there isn't a monster in the cupboard or under the bed. When they turn on the lights or shine a flashlight into the shadows, they demonstrate that the fear isn't matched by reality.

You can do something similar to short-circuit many fears you encounter as an adult. Research your fear until you have a realistic perspective on it. This can help with phobias such as a fear of flying. Flying is an extremely safe method of travel, much safer than driving, yet many people feel nervous on airplanes. Putting the risks into context can be reassuring.

Another option is exposure therapy, which requires gradually more intense encounters with whatever you're afraid of until you become more comfortable. If you're frightened of spiders, for example, you start by looking at a picture of a spider. As the fear dissipates, you progress to sitting in close proximity to live spiders and maybe even allowing them to walk across your hand until you become more comfortable in their presence. This is not to say that your fears are always unwarranted. Some spiders are dangerous and deserve a wide berth.

A third technique is to employ a mantra, such as the Litany Against Fear popularized by the classic sci-fi novel *Dune*. In the novel, people seeking to focus their minds during crises repeat this litany, which goes like this:

“I must not fear.

Fear is the mind-killer.

Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.

I will face my fear.”

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1. “Facing Your Fears”:

<https://nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/self-help-cbt-techniques/facing-your-fears/>

2. Frank Herbert, Dune (Ace, 1990).
