

# Fear

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## Fear

Fear influences many of society's actions and decisions. It is an emotion necessary to our survival and largely affects issues of racism, religious intolerance, and mental illness. I decided to research this topic in order to gain a better understanding of the line between obsessive fear and motivational fear. I can honestly conclude that I am far more aware of my personal fear and how it plays out in my life and the world at large.

This drawing represents the emotion of fear, its history, and chemical significance. In order to show fear's many different components, I created a skull out of wood, filling it with hundreds of small flowers to define the features of the skull – a symbol often associated with fear. Instinctively, fear is a defense mechanism used to ensure human survival and so I chose flowers to represent life. This is meant to evoke a feeling of remembrance and commemoration of fear in some way. I was inspired by traditional Mexican artwork and created this piece without too many guidelines to test my own boundaries of fear of failure and lack of control.

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We primarily believe that fear is an emotion but it is also a chemical reaction that occurs in our brain. The initial fear response begins in the part of the brain called the *amygdala*.<sup>1</sup> The amygdala becomes aware of fear before the rest of the body knows what the threat is. It prepares the body for “fight or flight” response by activating certain areas and releasing catecholamines from the nervous system.<sup>2</sup> It causes the brain to become very aware of our surroundings. It also causes heart rate to quicken and pupils to dilate.<sup>3</sup> Once this happens, a second part of the brain, the hippocampus, is activated.<sup>4</sup> This part of the brain uses more problem-solving techniques to deal with possible threats. The hippocampus determines whether or not the situation is actually dangerous.<sup>5</sup> The hippocampus response overrides the initial reaction to each fearful situation.<sup>6</sup> I am interested in many different aspects of fear. What is fear and how is it related to evolution, the individual, and our world today?

Fear has been both helpful and unhelpful for humans throughout evolution. The definition of fear in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger.” We may all have different triggers and tolerance for fear however we all experience it. It influences many of our actions and decisions day to day. The original purpose of fear was solely prevent living organisms from dying. In primitive stages of human life, fear would drive us to find food and avoid getting killed by wild animals.<sup>7</sup> However, in modern day, fear takes on a different role in our day to day life. Fear helps us stay motivated and avoid possible life threatening situations. However, in some cases it can make situations worse. As I have previously mentioned, when a threat appears, certain parts of the brain are activated and adrenaline is released. This forces our body to react in one of three ways: fight, flight, or freeze.<sup>8</sup> In the case of an early human running from a bear these three responses were helpful and allowed the early human to survive. However, when we have to present a very important topic to the class, fear only seems to hinder our potential. Ahmad Harri, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke university explains: “Change had occurred so rapidly for our species that now we are equipped with brains that are super sensitive to threat... so we essentially drive ourselves nuts worrying about things because we have too much time and don't have many real threats to our survival so fear gets expressed in these really strange, maladaptive ways.” Fear being expressed in new ways results in all types of fear disorders: hypochondria, anxiety, and insomnia. These disorders, specifically anxiety, have been consistently on the rise for many years, with more people experiencing anxiety than ever before. It is obvious that while fear creates some problems, it has far more benefits that outweigh them. In addition to ensuring

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<sup>1</sup> "Outsmarting Our Primitive Responses to Fear - The New York Times." 26 Oct. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/well/live/fear-anxiety-therapy.html>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> "How to Be Better at Stress - Well Guides - The New York Times." <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/well/how-to-deal-with-stress>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> "What Happens in the Brain When We Feel Fear | Science | Smithsonian." 27 Oct. 2017, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-happens-brain-feel-fear-180966992/>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>4</sup> "What Happens in the Brain When We Feel Fear | Science | Smithsonian." 27 Oct. 2017, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-happens-brain-feel-fear-180966992/>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>5</sup> "What Happens in the Brain When We Feel Fear | Science | Smithsonian." 27 Oct. 2017, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-happens-brain-feel-fear-180966992/>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>6</sup> "The science of fear - CNN - CNN.com." 29 Oct. 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/29/health/science-of-fear/index.html>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>7</sup> "Outsmarting Our Primitive Responses to Fear - The New York Times." 26 Oct. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/well/live/fear-anxiety-therapy.html>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>8</sup> "Outsmarting Our Primitive Responses to Fear - The New York Times." 26 Oct. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/well/live/fear-anxiety-therapy.html>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

our survival, fear forces and motivates us to do better. These two positives are for more important to ensuring human health and survival than the negatives that fear creates.

Aside from the evolutionary purpose of fear, I am also curious about the individual's experience of fear. The definition of *self-preservation* in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “preservation of oneself from destruction or harm,” or “a natural or instinctive tendency to act so as to preserve one's own existence.” It is clear that one's self, or the individual, is closely related to fear. Dealing with fear is a personal experience. Many people's struggles with anxiety disorders are a result of an overactive amygdala. Stressing out about every little detail leads to unhealthy relationships with fear. Thankfully, I have never had to deal with a diagnosed anxiety disorder but I have definitely experienced overthinking and allowed fear to control too much of my life. During these times it felt like my emotions controlled everything and I became consumed by my fears.

However, there are many ways to stop fearful tendencies and helpful tips to improve fearful situations. “Arresting an overactive amygdala requires first realizing and then admitting you're feeling uneasy and scared... if you can sense and appreciate your fear — be it of flying, illness or social rejection — as merely your amygdala's request for more information rather than a signal of impending doom, then you are on your way to calming down and engaging more conscious, logic-dominated parts of your brain. At that point, you can assess the rationality of your fear and take steps to deal with it.”<sup>9</sup> First you have to accept that you have an unhealthy relationship with fear and only then can you begin to help the problem. By viewing fear as something normal that is going to happen, you can move past it and reduce stress levels. However if you try to stop your feelings of fear it may only lead you to becoming more stressed out. It is helpful to use your emotions as guides rather than allowing them to consume everything you do. Then lastly you can logically assess the cause behind what you fear and whether it is an irrational fear or not.

Fear also plays an important role in shaping our social and cultural attitudes. I was curious about how fear plays into important issues such as racism and religion. The terror management theory is a tested theory that proves fearful people are more inclined to seek out religion. “Terror management theory suggests that people cope with awareness of death by investing in some kind of literal or symbolic immortality. Given the centrality of death transcendence beliefs in most religions, the authors hypothesized that religious beliefs play a protective role in managing terror of death.”<sup>10</sup> This theory illustrates that finding religion may lead people to stop fearing death because they have faith in an afterlife. Religion also can help people with the fear of something terrible happening because it is believed that it is all part of God's plan. “People who are intrinsically vested in their religion derive terror management benefits from religious beliefs.”<sup>11</sup> Belief in a religious system helps people find their purpose and helps people rid the fear of being worthless. Religion has been proven to not only reduce fear of death but also reduce fear and stress in all aspects of a person's life.<sup>12</sup> The National Center for Biotechnology wrote that “R/S (religion and spirituality) has been found to be inversely

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<sup>9</sup> “Outsmarting Our Primitive Responses to Fear - The New York Times.” 26 Oct. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/well/live/fear-anxiety-therapy.html>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>10</sup> “Terror management and religion: evidence that intrinsic ... - NCBI.” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16938037>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>11</sup> “Terror management and religion: evidence that intrinsic ... - NCBI.” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16938037>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>12</sup> “Terror management and religion: evidence that intrinsic ... - NCBI.” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16938037>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

correlated with the prevalence of any mental disorder and, in particular, to have a positive impact on depression, suicidal thoughts and behavior, and alcohol dependence and drug abuse.” Religion has been proven to help those dealing with a series of mental disorders and drug dependence. This disproves the idea that religion helps people cope with fear more effectively. When people are fearful of the afterlife or of being worthless they turn to religion to get confirmation that they have no need to be fearful. So instead of using substances to get them through the day, they can be reminded that they will find salvation.

In addition, fear has been closely linked with religious and racial intolerance. “It also plays a role in racial and religious intolerance because fearful people are more inclined to cling to the familiar and denigrate the unfamiliar.”<sup>13</sup> Fearful people are more likely to be intolerant because they fear people who are not like them. Intolerance is the source of some of the biggest issues that face us today racism, religious prejudice, and homophobia. All forms of hatred and narrow-mindedness stem from fear. One article explained what racism’s fear by unpacking the chant “you will not replace us.”<sup>14</sup> This chant that is used by white supremacists derives from their fear of replacement. “In other words: “You” will not replace “our” history and heritage with your liberal counter narrative of diversity and inclusion.”<sup>15</sup> This racist chant again disproves the theory that excessive fear leads to racism and prejudice.

Fear plays an enormous role in evolution, the individual, and our current world. Fear is a mental state we all experience that has developed over time and affects many aspects of culture today. Fear is the motive behind most of our actions and is the cause of many problems we face. Fear has created religion as well as racism. It is the reason we have adapted from primitive beings and are able to survive on this earth. If fear can be recognized and not be allowed to consume all human behavior but rather only influence decisions then we can become a far more peaceful and successful human race.

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<sup>13</sup> “Outsmarting Our Primitive Responses to Fear - The New York Times.” 26 Oct. 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/well/live/fear-anxiety-therapy.html>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>14</sup> “White 'Power' And The Fear Of Replacement - Burkhartpm On Narro ....” 28 Aug. 2017, <https://player.fm/series/burkhartpm-on-narro/white-power-and-the-fear-of-replacement>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

<sup>15</sup> “White 'Power' And The Fear Of Replacement - Burkhartpm On Narro ....” 28 Aug. 2017, <https://player.fm/series/burkhartpm-on-narro/white-power-and-the-fear-of-replacement>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2017.

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