

Fear: Sane or Neurotic?

Emotion can be construed as a side-effect of negative thinking. Sometimes it is. On the other hand, fear and other negative emotions can provide us with essential information about our surroundings, gleaned from a different kind of thought-process than logical cognition. That funny feeling that results in hesitation may, in fact, offer us essential guidance.

When we get a negative feeling in our bodies, we have an important job to do. We have to discern if the emotion is based on a realistic risk appraisal, or simply a neurotic thought based on negative expectations. Often we find our past intruding on matters of the present moment. We see how the current situation closely resembles something that has occurred in the past, as immediately assume that we are about to experience the same thing all over again. This may be the case, but this repetition of the past may have more to do with our belief that this is so. We are replaying old tapes, and neglecting to consider the possibility that we are a different person now, and we have the ability to create a different outcome.

This is neurosis in its most insidious form. When we look at our present moment through the eyes of the past, we limit the possibilities to only that which has already occurred. The future does not have to look like the past. Our fear often comes about based on such contractive thinking. We see a pattern that worked out badly in the past and we slip into the rut that makes this occur again. We live out a self-fulfilling prophesy.

There are times, however, that our fear is telling us that we are not up to the task. We are actually in danger, and the tendency toward hesitation due to our emotional reaction is completely valid. If our skills are not up to the challenge or we simply do not have enough control over a dangerous situation, we need to pause and re-assess whether or not we want to proceed. One of the ways in which we survive danger is by not moving forward when we are actually set up to fail. This is the sane function of fear. Even when this is the case, however, we must not react to fear. We must simply act, with clear intension of a positive outcome.

More often than not, our emotional reaction is based on negative thinking. We notice our physiological reaction and we assume that it is coming from a place of sanity and real limitation. Due to an incomplete appraisal, we limit ourselves in life because we let every negative emotion execute its contractive set of possibilities. We operate based on the assumption that all of our emotional thoughts are sane. They are not. Emotion is simply the alarm that gets our attention. It is up to our cool intellect to get us through the situation.

The job of the intellect is to make the judgment about whether the feeling is grounded in reality or simply neurotic, over-protective thinking. This is not an easy job, as emotion can shout at us. It can speak so loudly in

fact, that we have trouble thinking clearly enough to make a logical secondary appraisal. This is where our skills of de-escalation come into play.

When you feel the effects of negative emotion, your first job is to soothe the feeling with physiological changes. You must calm down your body, and work the situation from a “bottom-up” perspective. In other words, you must do the things that cool you off and separate you from the effects of the emotion. If you remain in the cloud of negativity, you will not be able to assess the situation from an outside perspective. You will be lost in the emotion and see only the possibilities that present themselves as a result of the negative feeling.

If you do the things that calm you down, like relaxing your muscles and slowing your breathing, you will begin to see alternatives to your original perspective. You will regain your inner balance so that you will be able to decide which thoughts were based on real limitations and danger, and which were simply based on patterns of fear response. From there, you are free to choose which way you want to go.

If we simply operate based on our initial appraisal and answers, we are missing the level of thought that is referred to as “meta-thought”. This is the secondary layer of processing that allows us to further our understanding of the situation. It creates the possibility of deeper complexity to our mental model of the situation, which most often is far closer to the truth. Our first glance at the circumstances is simple. Reality is complex. Take a moment, calm down, and consider the following possibility:

Things may be better than I originally thought.

This is the heart of positive thinking. If we leave the door open for more positive possibilities, we can live our lives without the limitation of neurotic thoughts. If we always consider that things may be better than we initially realized, we create alternatives that are better than our initial appraisal. We can, in fact, walk the path of our lives without fear getting in the way of our dreams for ourselves. We can become unlimited beings.

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