

Fear Itself



Understanding it, respecting it, and harnessing its power: Advice from an expert

Interview by Scott Alexander

We all have our hang-ups, whether they're ghosts, snakes, tunnels, the dentist, giving a toast as the best man at your best friend's wedding, or clowns. And let's not forget the big ones: Fear of going "tango uniform." Cashing out. Taking a lengthy dirt nap. But on the freak-you-out scale, it doesn't get much scarier than what happened to Brian

Germain. Germain was an avid skydiver until one of his chutes collapsed while he was descending, spiraling him straight down into the ground. He survived, but the doctors who put him back together told him he probably wouldn't walk again and that he most definitely wouldn't skydive (not that most in his position would want to). That's why it's somewhat remarkable that four years later, he wasn't just back on

a plane with a chute strapped to his back, he was accepting a first-place trophy in the world championship of "free-flying," a skydiving event in the X Games. Since then he's devoted his life to studying fear and what we can do about it. Along the way he's gone to graduate school in Psychology and has worked with everyone from trauma survivors to Iraq veterans and the Navy's Explosive Ordnance Disposal Units (that's naval speak for bomb squads). We spoke with him about the science of fear and the art of overcoming it.

Q: Isn't fear what keeps us alive? Do we really want to get rid of it?

A: Fear is not the same thing as caution. We tend to think of the feeling of fear as guiding us in the direction of safety, but it doesn't. Fear is the alarm. There's no intelligence in it. In fact, you can't think at all when an alarm is going off. You have to switch off the alarm to start thinking again. And thinking is what's going to make you safe.

Q: How do we acquire these fears?

A: Avoidance is a natural instinct. As humans we're wired to learn, and when we learn about things that hurt us, we try to avoid them. We developed this system of responses a very long time ago in reaction to living in a very hostile environment. But we don't live there anymore. We're not out in the woods getting chased by grizzly bears. If we let those same old avoidance patterns govern us, then we don't get to live like rational, decision-making humans, we live on pure instinct, like animals. You end up focusing on the things you perceive as dangerous, when you should be seeking out what's most pleasurable or interesting. And ironically, being governed by fear of negative outcomes can make those outcomes more likely. When you have stage fright, for instance, it's a massive distraction. It makes you more likely to screw up, not less.

Q: How do you get people past their fears?

A: You can't just eliminate the fear, that doesn't work. You have to replace it with something else. I get people to take on reasonable challenges and goals that stretch them just enough. The idea is to put them in a situation where the aversion impulse is present and part of their brain is screaming at them to run the other way, but the challenge is not completely overwhelming. That lets them get in touch with the heroic parts of themselves, to be able to see what it feels like to be another way. And it feels really good. Then we make the challenge a little bigger.

Q: Isn't it strange to help people with their fears by purposefully scaring them?

A: Hitting your limits is incredibly informative. And I've found that when you feel like you're in danger, whether physically, cognitively, or emotionally, if you can break through it, there's a level of joy and satisfaction that's higher than anything you

can experience when you're safe. The idea is to give yourself an opportunity to demonstrate your inner heroism. But we can't get to heroism through fear. You have to train yourself to change the channel. And before you can put on a new channel, you have to turn off the old one to get to the place where you're between channels and can make a choice about where to go next.

Q: And how do you do that?

A: You have to teach yourself to find a quiet place—to turn off the alarm, start thinking again, and then make good choices. I've found that one of the best ways to do it is to give people a song, because we all have songs that make us feel happy. We figure out what that song is for people, then when they start feeling overwhelmed by fear, they can sing that song to themselves and it'll give them a little breathing room so they can think and make choices. And once they're making choices, they can choose to turn on the heroism channel instead of the catastrophe channel.

Q: And then no more fear?

A: No way! It's a really basic human emotion. But you can make fear your ally. Fear has saved my life many, many times. When I get ready to jump out of an airplane and I have a funny feeling in my gut, and I realize it's too windy or I'm too tired, then fear is literally saving my life. I let it do its job, I just don't let it be the boss.

Brian Germain's Web site is transcendingfear.com.

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