

SELF HELP SHEET

Student Counselling Service

Fear

Fear is a normal human emotional reaction to stress. Fear is a pattern of chemical, physical and psychological changes that prepare us to cope with danger. Fear is a vital survival mechanism in that it prepares us for “fight or flight”. However, we learn fears as well. Some of the most commonly reported fears include fear of animals, (esp. snakes and spiders), heights and enclosed spaces, public spaces and transport, injury and illness and separation. Some of these fears appear “irrational”. There is no real danger involved. On the other hand, driving at excessive speed actually is a life-threatening event but is relatively uncommon in people’s fear list.

Fear can become disabling when the symptoms are so intense that they interfere with day-to-day activities. Fear may result in phobias, panic attacks and generalised anxiety. Phobias are a fear of things or situations that are not really dangerous and involve an unrealistic assessment of the danger.

Physiological - bodily sensations

The autonomic system is activated and adrenaline pumps into the bloodstream. The body’s immediate reactions can include more powerful heartbeats (palpitations), sweating, over-breathing, fainting and tension. Longer-term reactions are pains in muscles, nausea, and trouble with gastro-intestinal system. People can easily mistake these symptoms for evidence of serious illness and their anxiety and fear can escalate. It is important to know that these reactions are normal adjustments of our bodies preparing for conflict or escape.

Cognitive responses - dealing with the fear provoking thoughts.

The focus of the present fact sheet is on the cognitive component of fear. The way we think can totally alter the way we feel. Fear and anxiety can make us feel confused and scared. What we tell ourselves about our ability to cope with the threatening situation is important and impacts on our actual behaviour. It is crucial to take notice of our conscious thoughts and to become skilled in listening for our self-statements.

Some learned fears and ways of thinking that make situations more stressful:

Fear of failure, disapproval and rejection results from associating self-worth with external success, expecting to be perfect, failure to take into consideration one’s own needs and wants, assuming responsibility for the feelings of others and harsh self criticism.

Fear of competition and success can result when competition is viewed as a means of comparing oneself to others and not as a challenge to do one’s best. It often results in a student concentrating on his or her weaknesses and forgetting about personal strengths.

Fear of change can be experienced when there is an overestimation of the chances of disaster. Change is perceived as a threat, rather than an opportunity to have new experiences. It also relates to self-esteem being bound up in one’s surroundings.

Fear of intimacy usually stems from negative early experiences, for example, an abusive environment that discourages closeness in the present. Fear of intimacy entails association of vulnerability with weakness and inferiority, which in turn can lead to attempts to either control or avoid people.

Becoming aware of your fears:

Make a list of all your current life situations that trigger fear. Be specific, including the persons and settings involved. Rank the fearful experiences in order, from the least to the most fear producing, on a scale from 0-100. For example, "being alone at night because flat mate is working late" might be ranked 55 points, and "making a presentation in class," 70 points. Start with the least fearful situation and construct a vivid image of it. Record your fear producing thoughts. Write down your thoughts about the event, including subjective assumptions, beliefs, judgements and predictions. Record what you say to yourself about your worth. Dispute your self-talk, what you are saying to yourself about yourself. Look for supporting evidence of your fear provoking thoughts, from direct experience, from indirect experience and from rumour. Ask questions such as "Where is the evidence for this idea? Where is this written? Is there any support for my belief?"

Imagine the worst case. Ask the questions "What is the worst thing that could happen?" "What are the worst consequences if the worst thing happened?" "How tolerable would the consequences be?" "How likely is it that the worst will happen?" "What good things may occur?" Identify the cognitive errors that contribute to negative thinking e.g. all or nothing thinking, filtering, mind reading, catastrophising (see fact sheet on Depression). Replace the statements you recorded above with more reasonable, objective statements.

Work on writing a list of coping thoughts for the following four stages of coping:

- Preparation "I've succeeded with this before."
- Confronting the fearful situation "No need to rush", "take it step by step".
- Coping with fear "I'm only afraid because I choose to be", "keep my mind on the task".
- Reinforcing success "I did well! All I have to do is stop thinking I'm afraid".

Thought stopping techniques

List your fearful thoughts. Imagine the situation in which the fearful event is likely to occur. Close your eyes and focus on the thought. Take a deep breath and imagine yourself shouting, "stop" (or if you are alone shout out loud). In place of the fearful thought, make up a positive statement or assertive alternative. Develop several statements appropriate to the target situation.

Other techniques for dealing with fear.

There are several techniques for coping with fear. These include:

- Dealing with the physical symptoms of fear. Common ways are the use of relaxation and breathing exercises (Self Help Sheet on Stress).
- Assertiveness training (see fact sheet on Assertiveness).
- Controlling aspects of the fearful situation itself (Self Help Sheet on Crisis Management).

Further reading:

Leitenberg, H. (Ed). (1990). *Handbook of social and evaluation anxiety*. New York: Plenum Press.

Ross, J. (1994). *Triumph over fear*. New York: Bantam Books.

Young, J.E., & Klosko, J. (1993). *Reinventing your life - How to break free from negative life patterns*. New York: Dutton.
