

Fear: types, causes and effects



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

- Bradley Varney McLea

How Fear Allows Us to Better Know Ourselves

It is difficult to know how one would respond in a moment of fear or terror. People tend to give themselves the benefit of the doubt in situations like these. Fear is one of the most powerful emotions for all living creatures and the most extensively studied emotion (LeDoux, 2014). Autonomic responses are involuntary actions that take place inside our nervous system. Fear is an autonomic response that can only be triggered by outside stimuli. You cannot make yourself feel fear, but it is something that we more passively experience. In order to better understand ourselves and our basic nature, fear should be studied being one of our most primitive emotions. By looking at the origins of fear, the main categories of fear, the characteristics of fear, and the natural responses to fear I believe we can better understand the concept of fear what it means for us.

Do We Know the Origin of Fear?

To more fully understand fear it is important to understand its roots. Since the beginning of time, fear has been essential in the survival of the human race and the survival of many different species. Öhman, Carlsson, Lundqvist, and Ingvar (2007) found the following,

Fear denotes an emotion that has been primarily shaped in evolutionary arms races between predators and prey. Improved predator hunting skills have prompted more efficient defense manoeuvres by preys, which have put a pressure on further skill development in the predator, and so on. Thus, the function of fear is to motivate organisms to cope with threats that have jeopardized survival throughout evolution.

This quotation explains just how the “ game” is evolving; the prey is getting smarter and so the predator must do the same or starve. If the rabbits learn that a fox lurks around the woods at night, then the rabbits might start to only go into the woods during the day. The rabbits will start to learn the habits of the fox that way they can maneuver their way around and survive. This is how the game is evolving; the fox must now learn that the rabbits are getting smarter and so it must make changes if it wants to eat. The rabbits fear getting eaten and dying while the foxes fear starvation and dying, fear drives their motivation. Another example is of deer, when a deer is spotted in the woods, will it lift its head up and stare at strangers because it is friendly or because it is afraid? If a human approaches the deer too closely, it will turn and run. Will a fawn do the same, maybe not to the exact extent of a deer but yes. Some claim that many creatures, including humans, are born with an innate sense of fear. Is fear learned or is it part of our essence since birth? A toddler is not born afraid of fire; he will approach the flames without caution. Once the toddler touches the flame and is burned, he will cry and feel pain. Those flames will forever be associated with the pain he felt in that instant. According to McGuire et al. (2013), learning about and remembering fearful experiences are critical to survival. No one enjoys feeling pain and so they will avoid it, even a toddler knows to avoid and fear pain. It is not safe to say that fear is solely felt due to experience. Why will the baby cry in the arms of a stranger, but not in the arms of his mother? Does the baby feel afraid? I believe that the baby does feel fear in these instances, while the level of fear is not known. According to Trost, France, Vervoort, Lange, and Goubert (2014), people can be conditioned by observation alone. Due to priming, a sample group of people believed that they could get hurt doing

<https://assignbuster.com/fear-types-causes-and-effects/>

day to day activities. This sample group highly associated fear with pain. These people were so afraid to experience the pain that they were seeing during the priming that they refused to participate in many normal day activities. Living creatures can also be conditioned to fear certain things. An example of this could be a dog that fears the sight of a spatula because he knows that spatula means getting spanked. When I was young my parents would make loud sounds with a belt in order to spark fear in myself and my siblings. We began to fear the belt, especially if the belt ever accompanied us getting spanked. These forms of conditioning are used to put fear into the heart of someone or something else. There is no one that is completely immune to fear, it is something that is inescapable.

What Are the Two Main Categories of Fear?

Fear is divided into two major categories; these two categories include irrational and rational fear.

Irrational fears are not “ridiculous fears”, but they are fears that one has that do not pose an immediate danger to one’s life. Phobias are an example of irrational fears. Often people think that irrational fears would consist of fears that are extremely uncommon or strange, but in reality if one were asked what fears he has then almost all named would be considered irrational. According to Quandt et al. (2013), women with diabetes are terrified of leg amputation. Since they are so afraid of leg amputation, many of them will not walk around their house without their shoes on in case there is a nail poking upward. The likelihood of stepping on a nail inside your own house is slim to none, which means that the idea of wearing shoes to protect their feet is due to an irrational fear. Arachnophobia and claustrophobia are

fairly common phobias, or irrational fears. Most people will say that they have some sort of phobia/something they are afraid of. Recently, a woman claimed to be afraid of sharks. Yes, there are many sharks in the ocean, but the likelihood of a shark attack is very slim. In Hawaii, more people die from falling coconuts than from shark attacks. Irrational fears can be potentially dangerous, but are usually misjudged or magnified. A shark attack is very dangerous, but a lot of times the likelihood of occurrence is amped up significantly inside our minds. While watching horror films, people experience irrational fear since they are not actually in any form of danger.

Rational fears are opposite of irrational fears and are composed of immediate threats. If a gun is brought to school one day by a fellow classmate, students will experience rational fear. If the crime rate is high, then a fear of crime can be a rational fear (Chadee & Ying, 2013). Threats that can cause injury, death, and ruin reputation are rational fears and have a much higher probability of occurring than do irrational fears. If someone is afraid of heights and decides to go skydiving, that is also an irrational fear. While it may be dangerous to jump out of a plane, you are still strapped in and safely falling down with a skilled instructor. Do these fear categories ever overlap? Definitely, they do. This overlapping happens when the probability of danger increases. If Bob is afraid of heights, but decides to skydive, his irrational fear can become rational once one or two of his parachutes decide to not function correctly.

The Characteristics of Fear Allow Us to Detect

What does fear look like? Is it described by screaming or by “goose bumps”?

Characteristics of fear will vary from person to person and also with each

different situation. Some physical characteristics of fear involve a rapid heart rate, quick breathing, elevated adrenaline levels, perspiration, and the tensing of muscles. Depending on the severity of the degree of fear, one can also enter into a state of temporary paralysis which will prohibit the person from being able to scream, make sound, and sometimes even move. If a bunch of college kids decide to go into a cemetery late at night, the ones who are afraid are all experiencing similar or the same physical symptoms of fear. The physical characteristics of fear are generally the same for everyone, but the emotional characteristics will vary from individual to individual. Most people have negative feelings towards fear, but others enjoy it. “ Adrenaline junkies” will search for opportunities to feel fear because they like the way it allows them to feel. To people like them, fear is desirable and that is its characteristic for them. Fear is not an emotion that can easily be masked or denied due to the obviousness of these characteristics. When people experience negative feelings due to fear, you will see it on their faces. The same works vice versa when positive feelings are felt. Without someone saying that they are afraid, it is still very possible to diagnose their symptoms without any words being exchanged.

How We Respond to Fear Grants Understanding

Fear is the strongest of all the autonomic emotional responses. Since fear is completely an autonomic response; it cannot be consciously triggered. It is so fascinating that our consciousness cannot decide nor tell our unconscious how to think or behave. Of course, there are many factors that help define the human being but how often does one get to tap into the unconscious and

learn about our basic nature? To truly understand who we are, we must tap into the conscious and the unconscious parts of our own minds.

The two categories of fear responses

There are two different categories of fear responses: biochemical responses and emotional responses. Biochemical responses are quite possibly an evolutionary development, which allows us learn more about our nature. The major biochemical response is the fight-or-flight response. The fight-or-flight response is when the body will prepare itself to either stand its ground or run away. This response has been crucial to the survival of many species. When a threat is perceived, hormones are released throughout the body granting humans enhanced ability for survival. With these hormones circulating throughout our bodies, we become quicker, have increased strength, and can see more clearly through dilated pupils. Can we know if we would fight or if we would flee? The only way to truly know is to experience it. In non-human primates, the fight-or-flight response has been observed time and time again. Some researchers have concluded that the term should be reversed to flight-or-fight. The reasoning behind this reversal is that when a non-human primate first perceives a threat, then it enters into a “frozen” state followed by an attempt to run away. If the primate cannot flee and it feels it must fight, then it will fight (Bracha, Ralston, Matsukawa, Williams, & Bracha, 2004).

The second category of fear responses is the emotional response. This is generally a negative or a positive feeling. When negative feelings are associated with fear, then the individual will try to avoid the stimuli that are creating fear at all costs; this is how phobias are born. When positive feelings

are received as a response to fear, “adrenaline junkies” are born, and these people will actively seek activities that invoke fear. These people are not without fear, but they embrace fear itself and turn it into a natural high.

By attempting to understand the concept of fear we understand parts of our self. We are searching through the enigmas of the unconsciousness so that when we feel afraid, we can realize and better understand who we are. In the future, more research should be done on the emotional response of fear.

Researchers should study the “adrenaline junkies” to find out what chemicals in their brains are different. How does one person react so differently to fear? Although, one will not have conscious control over oneself during moments of fear, the beauty lies within the idea that this is human survival instinct at its best.

References

Bracha, H. S., Ralston, T. C., Matsukawa, J. M., Williams, A. E., & Bracha, A. S. (2004). Does “Fight or flight” need updating? *Psychosomatics*, 45 (5), 448-449. doi: <http://dx.doi.org.erl.lib.byu.edu/10.1176/appi.psy.45.5.448>

Chadee, D., & Ying, N. K. N. (2013). Predictors of fear of crime: General fear versus perceived risk. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 43(9), 1896-1904.

LeDoux, J. E. (2014). Coming to terms with fear. *PNAS Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 111 (8), 2871-2878. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1400335111

McGuire, J. L., Bergstrom, H. C., Parker, C. C., Le, T., Morgan, M., Tang, H., . . . Johnson, L. R. (2013). Traits of fear resistance and susceptibility in an advanced intercross line. *European Journal of Neuroscience*, 38(9), 3314-3324. doi: 10.1111/ejn.12337

Öhman, A., Carlsson, K., Lundqvist, D., & Ingvar, M. (2007). On the unconscious subcortical origin of human fear. *Physiology & Behavior*, 92 (1-2), 180-185. doi: 10.1016/j.physbeh.2007.05.057

Quandt, S. A., Reynolds, T., Chapman, C., Bell, R. A., Grzywacz, J. G., Ip, E. H., . . . Arcury, T. A. (2013). Older adults' fears about diabetes: Using common sense models of disease to understand fear origins and implications for self-management. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 32 (7), 783-803. doi: 10.1177/0733464811435506

Trost, Z., France, C. R., Vervoort, T., Lange, J. M., & Goubert, L. (2014). Learning about pain through observation: The role of pain-related fear. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 37(2), 257-265. doi: 10.1007/s10865-012-9483-4