

Coping Facts for

FACING FEAR

Fear
Fear is a natural human emotion. It comes in many forms including worry, anxiety, stress, and panic. Fear can be helpful – it is a basic human response to danger. It tells us when we need to pay attention to a situation and check out the facts. On the other hand, chronic worry and stress have been linked to both psychological and physical distress such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other illnesses.

The truth is, everyone feels fear – but that doesn't mean you have to let fear make your decisions for you.

Our Beliefs about Fear

How we react to things depends on what we believe about them. Fear is no exception. When we recognize the “Fear Factors” that make something more fearful, we can make better, more informed choices about the actions we take in response to our fear.

“Fear Factors”

We are more likely to be afraid of something if it follows certain patterns:

- **Dread:** Dying in a terrorist attack tends to seem more frightening than dying of a heart attack in your sleep because it is more “dreadful.”
- **Awareness:** Right now terrorism seems more frightening than mad cow disease because it is on our “radar screen.” The media plays a major role in defining current concerns.
- **Familiarity:** New risks tend to be more frightening than those with which we are familiar.
- **Scale:** Large, catastrophic events such as a terrorist attack tend to be more frightening than everyday risks like a car accident, even when we are more likely to be affected by the everyday risk.
- **Identification with victim:** We tend to be more afraid of things that target people we think are like us than people we think are different than us.

*Adapted from “Fear Factors’ in the age of Terrorism” by David Ropeik
<http://www.msnbc.com/news/643092.asp?cp1=1>*

You Have a Choice

How we respond to fear is our *choice*. We can choose to avoid feared situations (such as riding in an airplane) or we can choose to encounter the feared situation (riding in a plane despite feeling fear). The more often we choose to act with courage, the more quickly we will master our fears.

It may be helpful to ask others for help when we decide to act courageously. Finding a source of support, such as a friend, family member or a counselor, may help us manage our fears.

When is my Fear a Problem?

- Do you wish you worried less often?
- Do you feel worried or afraid even when things are going well?
- Do worries or fears interfere with your concentration or focus at work?
- Have your fears stopped you from doing major or minor life activities?
- Do you have trouble falling asleep or do you wake up in the middle of the night?
- Do you have physical symptoms such as headaches nausea or hot flashes?
- Have other people commented about your fears or worries?

Take Care of Yourself

- Make a plan and take action
- Take a break
- If you must worry, schedule time to for it and don't worry at other times
- Talk with a friend
- Use stress management techniques such as breathing, prayer, or relaxation
- Exercise, eat well, and rest

*Remember we have a **choice** to act even when we feel fear. The more often we act with “courage,” the less power fear has over us. We don't have to give in to fear.*

A Word About Courage

Our country has experienced several terrorist attacks during the past year: New York, the Pentagon, anthrax, and the sniper attacks. In addition, we have been exposed to ongoing threats and increased security resulting in lifestyle changes for many of us.

The aim of these terrorist attacks and threats is to take advantage of our natural fear response. By attacking few, they threaten many. They have caused us to question our safety. Many people worry or feel fear as a result of these attacks.

After September 11, 2001, we had the chance to see courage and heroism through new eyes. There was the extraordinary courage of rescuers who risked their own lives. There was also the quiet courage of people who took action in other ways, for example, by donating blood, checking up on friends, or returning to their everyday tasks despite their fears.

Courage is taking action even though you feel fear or worry. Courage can be as simple as taking the initiative to tell someone you are sorry, getting your mail during the anthrax scare, or trying out a new activity. Finding even small ways to take courageous action can help us to regain control of our fears. Remember that even when we feel fear, we still have the choice to act.

Please talk to someone if your fears seem to be too much to handle on your own.

From Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC). <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/>