

# The Unfear Individual: Face Threats with Resilience

Dear Reader

We have evolved, as human beings, to rely on fear. As early humans we faced numberless threats: poisonous berries, rivals, giant predators, heat, cold, starvation, etc. Our sense of fear helped us navigate this world. When we encountered a threat, we felt fear, which made us react, either by fighting the threat, or fleeing from it.

But now we have carried these robust threat detection systems into a much less dangerous world. We almost never encounter genuine physical danger (with obvious exceptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic). Yet we still suffer from seemingly endless anxiety. This is because our highly developed threat sensing mechanisms have pivoted to sensing *emotional* rather than physical threats. Stuff like a colleague undercutting you at work, your boss finding your performance unsatisfactory.

None of this represents a life-and-death threat. Yet our threat response system greets these scenarios with the same heart-pounding rush of adrenaline as it would a survival threat. Which begs the question: why? At the deepest level of the [iceberg](#), what are we actually afraid of?

## Worst-case Scenarios: The Root of Emotional Threats

While most emotional threats don't seem too severe, they're almost always tied to a material fear. For example, the fear that a boss won't like your work comes from a fear that you might lose your job, and then your house, the love and respect of your spouse, your kids, your sense of self-worth, etc... In other words, when an emotional threat causes fear, it's usually linked to a belief or a suspicion that we won't be able to handle the worst-case scenario. We link the initial threat to an escalating string of crises, which culminate in a genuine threat to our security.

To unfear ourselves, we need to recognize this, and challenge our assumptions. Is the worst-case scenario actually possible? Will we really not be able to handle it? If, somehow, the worst-case scenario actually does come to pass, what then? Is my life hopeless? When we consciously ask these questions, we realize that while the probability of the worst-case scenario is not zero, we have many other options to proactively and creatively deal with the situation. We can either prevent the worst-case scenario or know how to handle it when it arrives. We don't have to collapse in the face of fear and setbacks. We have agency, and an ability to face any threat we encounter with resilience.

## Hijacked by Fear

Fear literally hijacks our brains. It shuts down our prefrontal cortex (PFC), the part of our brains that separates us from other animals. It contains our capacity for reason, language, imagination, and critical thinking. Without the PFC, we operate based off pure instinct. This has advantages: when you see a snake, you should run, as fast as you can. But in the workplace, it has drawbacks, and when our brains are hijacked by fear we often make the wrong decisions. Pay attention to how you feel, notice when you are agitated. Try to return to a state of calmness, and allow your PFC, your reason and empathy, your imagination and critical thinking to guide your actions again.

## Worth thinking about

Language and imagination are the two human superpowers. We speak and imagine things into being. The stories we tell ourselves about our fear will create our reality. We can either, in the face of fear, resort to a fight or flight response. Or, you can respond with a story of resilience. For example, let us take the scenario of a boss who doesn't like your work. You can have a flight response story, like "This is so beyond my paygrade, I don't have what it takes to cut it here.", Or, a fight response, like "The boss is a -----, he's out to get me because I haven't sucked up to him enough. Two can play the game of undercutting." Both responses are examples of collapsing into fear. The third option is a story of resilience, learning, and growth, something like, "I need to understand why he feels my work fell short and make a plan to improve my output going forward".

## Take it to go

The next time you feel fear taking over and crowding out your rational thoughts, notice it. **Press pause**, and **pay attention to your body**. How do you feel? Is your heart beating? Are you shaking? How does your stomach feel? Before you make any decisions, **give yourself time to calm down**. Take a walk, meditate, have a cup of tea. Then, consider the initial problem. What would be a fight response? What would be a flight response? What would be a resilient, growth and learning oriented response?

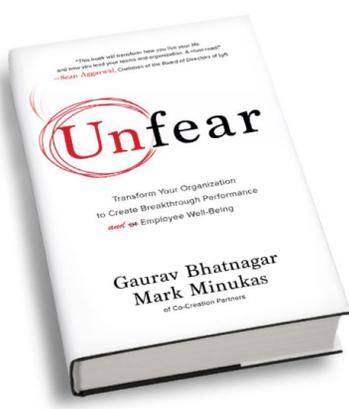
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