

POCKET POWER

FREEDOM FROM

FEAR



Hazelden

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FREEDOM FROM FEAR

It may have been years since we've felt the fear that permeated our using days. We may have experienced something of the new freedom and happiness promised by the program of the Twelve Steps. Yet fear may remain a problem for us. At times fear may try to dominate us again and we may react in the same old ways and wonder if we have made any progress at all. Responding to fear in constructive ways is an important dimension of ongoing recovery.

Fear and Denial

When we find ourselves burdened by resentments, if we look behind them we may discover fear in various forms. It may be the fear of not getting what we feel we want or need. It may be the fear of losing something or someone. Fear of loss of prestige or loss of self-image may result in deep anger at anything that seems to attack us. What we often call our perfectionism is sometimes nothing more than a desire to be beyond criticism. The desire to control the lives of those around us may really be a fear of acknowledging our powerlessness. As we attempt to develop a way of living which demands rigorous honesty, we may be forced again and again to acknowledge the reality of fear in our lives.

Fear causes the most trouble for us when we

pretend we have none or when we think our lives can be totally free from fear. Fear is not a defect of character. If we were deprived of our capacity for fear we would be robots, not heroes. The goal of the Twelve Steps is not to destroy our human capacity for fear, but rather to transform our responses to fear and eventually change the nature of them.

An example might help clarify the importance of fear. There are some people who are born without the ability to feel physical pain. At first, this might seem like a blessing. But as these people have been studied, or as anyone who lives with them can report, the lack of capacity for pain is a curse. As children, they need to be watched more carefully than children who feel pain. A child who feels pain will withdraw a hand from a burning oven. But a child incapable of feeling pain does not have that immediate instinct of withdrawal and can be seriously burned.

Growing into adulthood, people unable to feel pain have no way of knowing whether they are hurt or suffering from some illness. Pain, which is a symptom of illness, doesn't register for them. They can become seriously ill, not know it, and not seek adequate help. A person incapable of feeling pain may be as seriously hindered from living a full human life as the

person who suffers from chronic pain. Likewise, a person with no fear in any situation might have as much difficulty living as one whose life is dominated by fear.

We have all heard the phrase "I'm feeling no pain." That was often what we were seeking as a permanent condition through our drinking and using. We may at times have sought a way of escaping or confronting our fears by drinking and using. In ongoing recovery we are learning to accept the roles of pain and fear in our lives. The capacity and the experience of fear on occasion are important factors in helping us develop as recovering human beings.

Fight, Flight, or Freeze

In the early 1900s Dr. William Cannon did some research on what has been called the "fight or flight" mechanism. He discovered that most animals, when confronted with a dangerous situation, have an almost immediate reaction of either fighting back or fleeing from the danger. This fight or flight mechanism also seems to be part of our human reaction to things, people, and situations we fear.

Dr. Cannon also noted that almost all animals, when faced with a dangerous situation they cannot interpret, simply freeze and don't move at all. We all have probably come across a

squirrel or rabbit while walking and noticed that when it becomes aware of our presence it freezes for a moment. If we take a step toward it, the animal will dart off to the nearest tree or clump of bushes. It seems that in our own case as recovering people, fear can cause us to fight, flee, or even become paralyzed.

The fight, flight, or freeze mechanism is intended as a short term response to a particular dangerous situation. We can, however, respond in these ways over a very long period of time and do tremendous damage to ourselves as well as those around us. For example, someone may consistently refuse promotions which are really wanted because of a fear of failure or fear of responsibility. Another person may remain paralyzed in a relationship that is destructive because of the fear of being on one's own. Another person may live a life characterized by arguments and disagreements that are out of proportion to the cause. Extended over a considerable time period, these reactions to fear not only cause considerable stress, but they deprive us of the fullness of recovery. In our using days, our fear may have progressed to a point where we met every situation frightened of what could go wrong. In recovery we gradually learn to overcome our fear of people, or of doing things we had always wanted to do but didn't

have the courage. Gradually we learn to meet a situation, not in terms of the fear of it, but in terms of its potential. Through the program, we can begin to discern clearly what our fears are and what our initial responses to them may be. We learn that by sharing our fears with others, no matter how petty or irrational those fears may seem, we can make decisions regarding our fear rather than simply reacting to it.

Again, let it be noted that some fears are very healthy. For example, the fear of using again is healthy because we know returning to our former ways would be self-destructive. In this case, fear may be a motivator in keeping us clean and sober. Even in the healthiest people there remains a fear of using. But over the long run, fear will not keep us clean and sober.

Fear of Failure

Perhaps if we look back at some of our actions when we were using, we might discover we were not motivated by a desire for success, but rather by fear of failure. When fear of failure is coupled with expectations that are too high, it can cause us to refuse opportunities we may wish to take, paralyze us in the middle of a new venture, or lead us to pour our energies into avoiding failure rather than succeeding. All these fears rob us of the joy of achievement.

Fear of failure, or of appearing to be a failure, can haunt us well into recovery. It may even block us in our program, for example, by a fear of giving a talk when we are asked.

Fear of failure may be healthy when it keeps us from undertaking ventures we are not suited for, or when it tempers our grandiosity. Not wanting to see an undertaking fail is a normal and healthy reaction and may provide motivation for working harder. The question is, how do we know when our fear of failure is realistic and healthy and when it is unhealthy fear blocking our growth and dominating our lives? One way of deciding whether our fear is realistic or unhealthy is to discuss it honestly with somebody else. If we hear ourselves saying, "I don't want to talk about it," then it is likely our fear is an unhealthy one.

Willingness to discuss our fear honestly with another person in the program gives us good insight. Frequently we may find we are victims of false fears which will melt away in the face of our own honesty. We may discover our fears are normal and shared by other people, and need to be worked on.

It is important to remember that the final decision, whether to listen to a particular fear or not, is our own. A person trying to decide whether or not to return to school may discover

a great deal of fear surrounding that decision. By sharing this fear the person may realize such fears are normal and shared by many other students. Sharing fear lessens its power over us and gives us the strength to proceed with a decision even though some of the fear may remain. Knowing we are not alone and that we are not the first person to be in a position to make such a decision can give us the strength we need.

Someone struggling with a decision whether or not to accept a new position might discover, through sharing fears of a job change with another person, these fears are authentic and maybe there is good reason not to proceed with this particular change. The person may discover that he or she is considering making a change not because it is wanted, but because of the fear of how it would look if it were refused. The person may have legitimate fears regarding what such a move would mean to self, family, and ongoing recovery. By sharing these fears with others it becomes possible to make better decisions. A person deciding whether or not to speak at a meeting may discover that the fear is indeed genuine and that he or she is not quite ready. By sharing fears, one may discover there are other things to do. For example, one could speak up more at discussion meetings, go out with the group after a meeting and do some

talking, or perhaps even take a speaking class to lessen the fears and provide opportunity for growth.

The point to all of this is that as we share fear of failure with other people, a number of good things can happen. We have a firmer foundation for making good decisions. We become able to listen to our fears and respond to them rather than simply react, and we run less risk of being dominated by them.

Fear of Rejection

Another major source of fear for many people is the fear of rejection. This particular fear is normal, to be expected in the course of recovery, and may pop up when we are least prepared. It is one of the most difficult fears in life to deal with; however, it is not impossible. It is a familiar fear to most chemically dependent people. At any time, it can loom up as one of the major roadblocks to the fullness of life.

In its extreme forms, fear of rejection may lead us to being overly aggressive in our relationships. As an extension of the fight syndrome, it may lead us to keep others away, by constantly battling with them and not giving them an opportunity to reject us. As an extension of the flight syndrome, we may avoid giving people an opportunity to really get to know

us because we fear they won't like us if they know who we really are. The fear of rejection may lead us to extremes of "people pleasing." It may even cause us to do things we would rather not do.

There is no neat and simple way to deal with fear of rejection. The fact is, most of us learn to handle it the hard way by being rejected and discovering we can survive it. Perhaps the best way to work through fear of rejection is by becoming aware of the pain that fear itself causes, and to be aware that this fear is more painful than the actual rejection. If we allow ourselves to be dominated by the fear of rejection, we actually reject ourselves, and this is more painful than having someone else not accept us. Again, sharing our fear with others can lessen this fear and enable us to take a chance and grow in healthy ways.

How to Deal With Our Fears

Perhaps the best advice regarding fear comes directly from the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous. It says, "We reviewed our fears thoroughly. We put them on paper, even though we had no resentment in connection with them." Fear belongs in our inventory on a regular basis. The reason is that fears, even those which may be healthy, may be the source of self-

pity, resentment, and dishonesty. The fear of not getting what we want, of losing something we have, or of not looking good are all normal fears and do not disappear simply because we no longer use. Indeed, they can be so subtle that they can enter our lives at any point. Willingness to share our fears is an effective and practical way of dealing with them. As we have noted, the very act of sharing a fear may cause it to melt away or give us new insight to deal with it. Fear, unattended and unshared, will grow and become more of a problem.

The regular practice of prayer and meditation is a way of becoming free from our fears. The "Big Book" recommends the practice of short prayers in times of stress which ask for guidance and indicate a willingness to let go. Many people find that saying the serenity prayer or just thinking about it can alleviate a momentary fear. For fears and anxieties that may be deeper, the regular practice of meditation for twenty minutes or more a day may have significant long-term effects. Returning to a passage from a favorite meditation book or the slow, quiet, and unharried repetition of a favorite phrase may help us not only improve our conscious contact with God as we understand Him, but also bring about a sense of serenity that alleviates our fears.

Responses to Fear

We are seeking in recovery not to be free from the capacity for fear, but rather to become free from fear which dominates our lives or interferes with the fullness of our growth and development. As we become aware of fear and face it, we have more freedom of choice in how we respond to it, but this requires courage. The word *courage* is derived from the Latin word *cor* which means "heart." Thus, to encourage someone is to "enhearten" — to put heart into him or her. To discourage someone, then, means to take the heart out. Fear can discourage us. It can take the heart out of our lives and our recovery. So we need to discover and cultivate sources of encouragement. We may find this in the Twelve Steps and in people in recovery programs. We may discover sources of encouragement through new activities as well as through prayer and meditation. We may even discover courage within ourselves.

Courage may show itself by our willingness to take a small step in the face of fear rather than an overwhelmingly big step we cannot make. Our willingness to take a risk in the face of our fear is no small matter. Sharing that triumph can provide us with the foundation for further steps and also serve to encourage those around us. Acknowledging the progress we have made

in becoming free from the fear that dominated our lives is a source not only of gratitude, but of courage and faith in meeting present fears.

As in recovery, there is a gift dimension to faith. Just as we grow and develop in recovery so, too, we may grow in faith. Faith is simply the open willingness to receive help. For some, growth in faith is slow and steady. For many of us, growth is occasioned by pain and feelings of fear or resentment. The faith and trust we thought had freed us from fear begins to seem fragile. But as one old timer in the program said, "God did not get us sober just to throw us back." We can have faith that our Higher Power will turn the crisis into opportunity.

"Freedom from fear" means being free from a life dominated by fear, rather than being free from the capacity for it. Fear can play a healthy role in the growth of our sobriety. When fear leads us to a "fight, flight, or freeze" reaction it can be harmful, and this is most likely to happen through fear of failure or fear of rejection. A regular inventory of the role of fear in our lives keeps us from denying that fear exists. Sharing our fears with others can be the source of courage and faith we need to meet them. Prayer and meditation are ways of sharing our fears with our Higher Power and transforming them. The program of the Twelve Steps does

indeed promise us new freedom and happiness and the freedom from fear for life.

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