Fear: Can’t Live with It, Can’t Live without It

Scott O. Lilienfeld

By Scott O. Lilienfeld

One of the first clients I treated in my therapy training in clinical psychology in the early 1980s was a 22-year-old college senior psychology major I’ll call James. In almost all domains of life, James was successful and self-assured. Yet he had bumped up against a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. To graduate, James needed to pass the required course in laboratory methods that compelled students to conduct a few simple learning demonstrations with rats, of which James had been morbidly afraid since childhood. Working with James, I first came to appreciate just how paralyzing fear can be.

He’d never been bitten by a rat, and had seen a live rat only once, scurrying away from a garbage dump at night. But the mere prospect of interacting with a rat had filled James with such abject terror that he’d postponed the course for several years, hoping beyond hope that he’d somehow find a way of sparing himself the fear in the interim. He hadn’t. Now he was confronted with an unenviable choice: drop out of college or get over his fear. He selected the latter.

James proved to be the ideal client: motivated, cooperative, and insightful. He understood that his fear was irrational, but was at a complete loss to know what to do about it. So we began by jointly constructing a hierarchy of fear-provoking experiences, starting with situations that James was certain he could handle with minimal anxiety — such as looking at a photograph of a rat in a book — and eventually working our way up to his holding a live pet rat. Yet during our second session, James found that merely viewing a photo of a rat suddenly was too much to handle, as if he were overcome by the looming ultimatum. We went back to the drawing board and decided to begin with his viewing a cartoon drawing of a rat, but even that step proved too anxiety-generating. Finally, we settled on his starting by looking at the word “rat” from a distance, an experience that triggered only mild anxiety. Over the next two months of weekly sessions, we gradually worked our way up our agreed-upon ladder of fear-provoking stimuli, culminating in his handing a real-life rat. James conquered his fear, sailed through the laboratory methods course, and graduated with a B.A.

Fears fall into categories

Fear, it’s safe to say, is an emotion most of us would prefer to live without. When fears become extreme, as was the case with James, they manifest themselves as phobias: intense, irrational apprehension of places, objects, or situations. Such fears can assume a seemingly endless variety of forms. Among the more esoteric are coulrophobia (fear of clowns), arachnophobia (fear of spiders), and aerophobia (fear of flying).

Yet this apparent diversity is deceptive, because we can subsume most phobias under a small number of categories. The most recent (fourth) edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders identifies four subtypes of “specific phobia,” the most widespread version of pathological fear:

- **Natural-environment phobia**, the fear of heights, water, thunderstorms, and darkness. These are among the stimuli that Martin E. Seligman, best-selling author, psychology professor and director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, in a 1971 article in the journal Behavior Therapy, called “prepared,” meaning that we’re predisposed evolutionarily to fear them because of the risks they posed to our ancestors. For instance, Phil Rizzuto, Hall of Fame Yankees shortstop and legendary sportscaster, had such an intense phobia of lightning that he would routinely leave the announcer’s booth during thunderstorms.

- **Animal phobia**, with dogs, cats, snakes, insects, and spiders receiving top billing. Such phobias usually begin in childhood and commonly dissipate by adolescence, perhaps because most children as they age have repeated uneventful encounters with animals.

- **Situational phobias**, typically the fear of specific situations, like closed-in spaces (claustrophobia), elevators, airplanes, and motor vehicles. Situational phobias commonly overlap with a more pervasive condition called agoraphobia, a fear of an array of situations in which panic attacks — sudden surges of terror — are likely.

- **Blood/injury/injection phobia**, the fear of blood, injury, medical shots, or deformity. In contrast to other phobias, which are marked by sharp increases in heart rate and blood pressure, blood/injection/injury phobia is marked by sharp decreases in heart rate and blood pressure, explaining why it often produces fainting. Many psychologists suspect that this cardiovascular response is a residue of an evolutionarily adaptive reaction: When we’re losing blood, we want our heart and blood vessels to ramp down output to help survival.

Given that most of us don’t exactly enjoy pondering our own inevitable demise, we might expect the most common fear to be of death (thanatophobia). Yet population surveys show that fear of public speaking (glossophobia) comes in at number one, while fear of death usually ranks a distant second. When fear of public speaking reaches excessive proportions, it becomes social phobia, also called social anxiety disorder. People with social phobia are petrified of situations in which they could become embarrassed or humiliated; they are terrified of how others may
Some of the more common phobias include fear of snakes, clowns, spiders, and enclosed spaces such as tunnels. Do any of these frighten you? Or does something else terrify you?

social species, we are exquisitely attuned to signals of fear in others. Research shows that when flashed photographs of others’ facial expressions of a few seconds or less, most of us are quicker to pick up fear than other emotions. This finding makes evolutionary sense, because if those around us are scared, they may have detected a threat of which we’re unaware.

Psychologically, fear renders us oversensitive to dangers. By doing so, fear often distorts reality. But as the evolutionary principle of “adaptive conservatism” reminds us, better safe than sorry. Indeed, research using computerized images shows that people with phobias overestimate the extent to which feared stimuli, like photographs of spiders, are hurting toward them. As a German proverb notes, “Fear makes the wolf bigger than he is.”

External and internal factors cause fear

If fear is generally adaptive, why does it sometimes become maladaptive? As clinical psychologist David Barlow, founder/director of the Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders at Boston University, notes in his 2004 book, _Anxiety and its Disorders_, we can conceptualize fear disorders as “false alarms.” They reflect the triggering of a fight-flight response in the absence of genuine danger. Virtually all of us would experience a full-blown panic attack while drowning or being chased by a lion, but the threats in such cases would be real and the fight-flight response helpful to our survival. In panic disorder, in contrast, we witness identical patterns of physiological arousal, like racing heart, sweating and hyperventilating, but in situations that are objectively safe, such as an afternoon stroll in a marketplace. So, fear disorders reflect the activation of an otherwise adaptive response that has gone awry for still largely mysterious genetic and environmental reasons.

Although fear surely has deep-seated evolutionary roots, it is just as surely shaped by culture. Some sea hunters in Greenland suffer from “kayak angst,” a marked fear of going out in kayaks and an intense desire to return to land, despite the necessity of such travel, for instance, to hunt fish. Kayak angst bears conspicuous similarities to the Western condition of panic disorder with agoraphobia. Some individuals in Asian cultures, especially Japan, experience “taijin kyofusho,” which appears to be an Eastern variant of social phobia and is characterized by a fear of offending others, most typically by one’s behavior, appearance, or body odor. Interestingly, most Asian cultures are more “collectivist” — concerned with group harmony — than are Western cultures, so taijin kyofusho may reflect the manifestation of extreme social anxiety in societies in which upsetting others is a cardinal sin.

For a look at stage fright, see page 24.
Gender plays a role, too. In a groundbreaking 2000 article in *Psychological Review*, University of California, Los Angeles, psychology professor Shelley E. Taylor, director of the school's Social Neuroscience Lab, and her colleagues amassed a substantial body of evidence to show that when frightened, women are more likely than men to display a "tend and befriend" response, as opposed to the better known fight-flight response. That is, when afraid, women more often turn to nurturing and bonding with others, including their children and friends. As even casual viewers of HBO's Sex and the City know, women often gravitate to the show's close buddies (ideally, at upscale New York City restaurants) when stressed out by work or romance.

Psychopaths lack fear.

The proposition that fear is adaptive leads to a straightforward prediction: People without sufficient fear should be psychologically impaired. In their 1996 book, *Why We Get Sick: The New Science of Darwinian Medicine*, the noted evolutionary theorists Randolph M. Nesse and George C. Williams posited the existence of a yet-to-be-discovered disorder: "hypophobia," or fearlessness. In reality, we needn't look terribly far for such a condition, as psychologists and psychiatrists have recognized it for decades. First described systematically by Harvey M. Cleckley in his trailblazing 1941 book, *The Mask of Sanity*, it's termed psychopathic personality, or psychopathy. Psychopaths, as they're called colloquially, tend to be superficially charming, yet guiltless, callous, egocentric, and dishonest. They're often prone to antisocial and criminal behaviors, like pick-pocketing, shoplifting, fraud, and, in extreme cases, violence. Some psychologists have suggested that bank robber John Dillinger, serial killer Ted Bundy, and convicted swindler Bernard Madoff embody the cardinal features of psychopathy.

If you think a life free of fear is easy, think again. The paucity of fear can be every bit as maladaptive as its surfeit. In a 1957 article in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, University of Minnesota psychophysiological scholar and behavioral geneticist David T. Lykken argued that psychopaths possess a "low fear IQ," or more technically, a high threshold for experiencing fear, allowing them to take physical and social risks that would unnerve the rest of us. In classic research reviewed in his 1995 book, *Antisocial Personalities*, Lykken discovered that psychopaths don't develop adequate conditioned associations between neutral tones paired repeatedly with electric shock. When presented with the tones alone, psychopaths — in striking contrast to the rest of us — barely respond physiologically. Consequently, they don't become frightened in anticipation of signals of impending threat. Interestingly, their response to the shock itself is essentially identical to that of normals.) In a 1966 study, also published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, influential researcher and academic Robert A. Hare found that when asked to wait for an electric shock (or, in later research, a joltingly loud noise), psychopaths display markedly lower skin conductance responses — a good index of arousal — than do nonpsychopaths, again suggesting a deficit in fear sensitivity. This fear deficit may render children susceptible to many of the features of psychopathy like lack of guilt and empathy. Fear, after all, is an essential socializing agent for parents and teachers. Without fear, children have little motivation to learn from their mistakes or to predict the negative reactions of powerful others. As the philosopher Nietzsche observed, "Fear is the mother of morality."

"Why, then, have psychopaths not been pruned out of the population by natural selection? We don't know. One tantalizing possibility is that psychopaths' fear deficiency, although generally maladaptive, may be adaptive in selected settings. Research by clinical psychologists and university professors Stephen D. Benning, Christopher J. Patrick, and colleagues published in *Psychological Assessment* in 2003 suggests that a key component of psychopathy is fearlessness, a blend of physical and social boldness. People with high levels of fearlessness — a subset of whom are psychopaths — may be overrepresented in certain "adaptive niches," like business, politics, entertainment, contact sports, firefighting, and law enforcement, in which their boldness affords them a competitive edge over their timorous peers (although of course the bulk of people in these occupations will never become psychopaths). Still, the scientific support for this hypothesis is preliminary.

What is, then, the only thing we have to fear?

All of this brings us to an intriguing conclusion. Much as we'd like to live without fear, most of us need it, at least in moderate doses. Even my early client James knew he had to overcome his fear of rats and was afraid of what would happen if he didn't; without his healthy fear of dropping out of college, James might never have sought treatment. Natural selection may have predisposed the bulk of us to experience intermediate levels of fear, but allowed a few of us with low levels of fear to thrive in certain vocations and avocations — and perhaps capitalize on the fears of the rest of us. Novelist Henry Miller may have gotten it right: "There is nothing strange about fear. No matter in what guise it presents itself it is something with which we are all so familiar that when a man appears who is without it we are at once enslaved by him."

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Scott D. Lilienfeld (University of Minnesota), Professor of Psychology at Emory University, is author or co-author of several books, including 50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology: Shattering Widespread Misconceptions about Human Behavior (with Steven Jay Lynn, John Ruscio, and Barry L. Boyenstein; Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), and more than 250 articles and chapters on psychopathic personality, psychiatric classification and diagnosis, anxiety disorders, evidence-based practice in clinical psychology, and pseudo-science in psychology. Educated at Cornell University (B.A. in Psychology) and University of Minnesota (Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology), he is a fellow of the Association for Psychological Science, editor of *The Scientific Review of Mental Health Practice*, and past president of the Society for a Science of Clinical Psychology. Email him at slilien@emory.edu.