



Fear- A Challenge that Unfolds the Potential for Self Evolution

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Abstract

Like other basic human emotions, fear is the most universal emotion experienced and displayed throughout the world. This opinion paper highlights the nature of fear, its causes, origins and its coping mechanism. The emotion of fear is primarily understood as a response to a stimuli based on cognitive learning. However presence of a genetic predisposition, environmental factors, social and cultural norms cannot be denied. Presence of fear can be considered good or bad, rational or irrational. Fear in a situation can protect a person against danger; however in another instance when based on judgement or non-evaluative reasoning, it can make a person dysfunctional. The paper delves into the philosophical aspect of fear, where fear can be better understood as a force that opens the door to self-discovery and personal evolution. Emotional awareness leads to acceptance and responsibility for person's state of being. Hence realization of fear creates the first step to conquer it. A willingness to bring about positive change can turn fear into strength. The need to conquer fear unfolds the potential for transformation.

Keywords: Fear; Cognitive-Social Learning; Emotional Awareness; Acceptance; Personal Evolution

Introduction

Presence of Fear

Fear is one of the most common emotions experienced by human world over. Displayed and experienced in multiple forms, physically, verbally, through words, actions and bodily changes, fear can be both good and bad, depending on its nature and experience. Primarily considered as a negative emotion or a threat, fear may differ in its presence, cause and effect. What is perceived as frightening by one person may not be true for another. For instance, in a group of 10 people there may be 2 who fear heights. However, the same factor of height may not be recognized as a risk by the remaining 8 people. On the contrary, those 8 people may have separate causes of fear in their lives, which the prior 2 people are neutral to. At times fear is judged as rational and appropriate, particularly when it protects a person against impending danger. It may serve as a great motivator to help

refrain from taking to harmful habits or hazardous activities. A typical case would be the fear of mouth cancer. It may discourage a person towards the consumption of tobacco or getting habitual to smoking.

As discussed by Diaz R, et al. [1] Even if fear is understood as a danger, it may still carry an epistemological value that makes a person aware of that danger. Thus fear can be considered correct or incorrect on the basis of the presence of danger attached to that fear. This view questions the reactive theory that suggests fear is a response to stimuli and is irrelevant to our knowledge of danger. Many a time fear is a by-product of an unpleasant experience, memory or learnt response passed on from one or more surrounding factors. Examples include media influence, public interaction, social conditioning, cultural norms, parental behavior and similar environmental contributors.

Fear- A Learnt Response

Though fear is predominantly understood as a learnt response, it is important to share the findings of some studies that provide evidence of fear being passed down through family histories as an underlying genetic predisposition. According to Seligman ME [2] there are some common things people learn to fear that are almost universal and reflect dangers that their ancestors faced throughout the history of evolution. Unlike fear of loud noises or sudden movement, which is hardwired through associative learning, there is what can be called 'prepared fears'. These are proposed to be genetically transmitted and need environmental inputs to be activated. Examples include fear of snakes, spiders, dark etc.

In my opinion no baby is born with fear, they perceive and develop their fear(s) over time, as they grow. In fact, it is the social conditioning and family upbringing that creates fear or fearlessness in the young mind. There have been studies that support the same. Fear is not just a learnt response, but a behavioral pattern that can be unlearned or erased over time through immersion and cognitive exposure techniques utilized in psychotherapy. Repetitive incidents of facing the fear producing object in safe environment, with personal support and re-education, can lead to gradual alleviation and in many cases complete disappearance of the fear.

Here, it is good to quote the early infant game of Peek-a-boo highlighted in a study by Bruner JS, et al. [3]. Peek-a-boo is a fairly old play which has existed and still continues to, in many cultures across the globe. During this play, initially the infant finds it to be fear inducing, as the parent or adult hides their face, creating a sense of separation anxiety, sometimes a startled response by the infant. Sooner, the infant starts to find the parent's disappearance and reappearance amusing, laughing at it together with the parent. The parent through play teaches the infant that there is nothing to be afraid of, as all is well at the end. With repeated games of this play, as their looks reunite towards the end with a smile and funny sound made by the parent, the infant's unpleasant emotion vanishes. As the fear is replaced by humor, the infant starts enjoying the play even more. So, the experience of an unpleasant emotion at the beginning of the play later transforms into a pleasant and happy emotion. There is sufficient amount of research based on the emotion of humour as a tool to help overcome fear. According to Pistoia JC [4] there is a fine line between scary and funny that points to the potential of humor as a coping mechanism for dealing with fear.

Conclusion

It is clear that fear is a universal emotion experienced worldwide. In the words of Nesse RM [5], "very few people suffer from too little fear in their daily lives. Rather, many

suffer unnecessary stress from an over sensitized fear system." Fear can be called positive and negative as illustrated by Abdulzaher M [6] too much fear or negative fear can make a person dysfunctional. However, positive fear can be a life saver by cautioning the person of the impending danger and preparing them to take necessary action. By large, fear develops over time through cognition and learning, even genetic predisposition. If we consider fear as a learnt response then it can be unlearned too. Being aware of one's emotion is foremost, whether fear, sadness, happiness or any other. It is valuable to appreciate and admit the emotion, be it positive or negative, respectively. Acknowledging a positive emotion leads to contentment. While, accepting an unpleasant one paves way for improvement.

Turning Fear into Strength

Similarly once we recognize and own the fear, we can start to work upon it, overcome and clear the ill effects on our daily functioning. Fear challenges the potential for change. However, it largely depends on the willingness of the person, to accept the challenge to dive deep into the origin and nature of the fear. This new ideation opens the door to intervention and self-discovery. To overcome fear(s) means to obtain victory over struggle. With the help of inner power and professional support we can turn a fear into strength. A psychological approach can prove useful to deal with unnecessary anxiety of everyday life. Other than self-reflection, psychotherapy, personal counselling, family and friend support may prove beneficial. Courage is not about the absence of fear; rather it is facing the fear and gaining victory over it. In my opinion one must not consider it as a roadblock, instead as a force that prompts to walk the path that once was never thought of. If we succeed in finding strength that lies beneath our fear, then it transforms into a force. The same fear turns into a catalyst resulting in personal evolution. Victory over one fear cultivates the confidence to look up in other areas of life, where fear resides and potential hides.

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