

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Living with Fear

I confess. Recently, I've been a little scared most of the time. Some days I can hardly feel it, but often it's there, lurking in the background. It makes me want to avoid returning phone calls even to people I really like, avoid marketing a business I deeply believe in and am excited about, avoid to-do list items that require any self-stretching, and avoid the deep stillness of good rest that calls me to feel my fear instead of hiding from it.

I suppose this wouldn't seem so weird if I were in a war zone, avoiding bullets left and right. But circumstantially, I'm in a really good season of life right now. It's just that I'm transitioning from some good, familiar things to better, unfamiliar things in several areas of life. And I don't like change, even good change. It's unfamiliar and it makes me feel out of control. I really like the illusion of control and when I can't maintain it, I feel ongoing low-level fear.

I've been wondering recently what would happen if I listened to my fear and avoided everything that made me nervous. I'd leave the job I love to do something predictable that required no marketing. I'd leave my closest relationships because those require a ton of risk. I'd sell my house and car because one never knows when they could break down and be very expensive. I'd never travel or adventure outdoors because that's how everyone gets Swine Flu and torn ACLs. And I'd stay constantly busy with menial work or idiotic Facebook quizzes so that I would never have to encounter the feelings that arise when I start to rest and relax. Talk about a life to be afraid of—I'd be a walking dead woman!

What's the Point of Fear?

Let's admit it. Fear is great for keeping us away from burning buildings and psycho killers. But if we let it sing solo in our lives, without the chorus of inner voices like logic, drive, and longing and the outer voices of wise people who can speak into our lives, we'll soon be singing the Zombie Jamboree. Really, all fear should be allowed to do is to tell us to stop our headlong rush toward something unfamiliar and think about whether it is beneficial. Once we've thought about it and decided that, all things considered, it's good to go forward, fear needs to be put in its place, not allowed to run the show.

But that's easier said than done, isn't it? In previous newsletters, I've talked about the fact that we've got three brains. Of the three, the Reptilian Brain—the one that houses the functions that we share with reptiles—only knows four things: fight, flight, freeze, or feeling fine. No doubt you noticed that three out of the four are responses to fear. The Reptilian Brain is such a specialist in fear that it is allowed to directly control our body's fear responses without asking the permission of the delayed, deliberating logical mind. This lets us be poised to fight, flee, or freeze at any moment.

The problem is that when our Reptilian Brains are pumping adrenaline into our bodies and tensing our muscles for the fight, it's almost impossible to get our New-Cortex, our logical thinking brain, to stop having anxious thoughts. All we want to do when the Reptilian Brain is

screaming “be afraid” is to attack, escape, or tensely do absolutely nothing to make the threat go away. So our logical thinking brain comes up with all kinds of thoughts related to attacking, escaping, or freezing to reflect the state of our bodies because it’s weird to think calm thoughts while the body is ready to rumble. The logical brain’s anxious thoughts, responding to the body, then confirm to the Reptilian Brain that we are in fact in danger. This is because, dummy that it is, the Reptilian Brain can’t tell the difference between actually being in danger and just thinking about it. So it stays activated and keeps pumping adrenaline, even when nothing is actually threatening our lives, so we just can’t relax. It’s a vicious cycle.

Chilling Out Fear: The Quick Fix

To shut up this residual, non-helpful fear, we need to use our logical minds to force our bodies to be calm. This is the trick to getting our Reptilian brains to move from “engage” to “at ease, soldier.” There are lots of ways to do this, but perhaps the quickest (and least obvious in a public setting) is to make ourselves sit in a comfortable, relaxed position and then gradually inhale and exhale more and more slowly and steadily until we’re breathing in on a count of 7 and breathing out on a count of 7. When we make ourselves breathe this slowly at least several times in a row, our Reptilian Brain thinks, “Dude, it’s almost like I’m sleeping. Guess I can chill.” Then our logical thinking brain can get the break it needs to change its churning thoughts. It becomes possible for us to choose to listen to voices other than fear.

I know, this sounds silly and weird. But folks who practice it once a day and as needed during particularly anxious seasons report amazing results. It takes living with fear down from paralyzing to tolerable until the brain can finally navigate through the anxious season of change and learn that the new, changed environment is not life-threatening.

Now let me reiterate. I’m not saying that we should short circuit all of fears’ messages and that our first response to nervousness should be to practice slow breathing to make it go away. First, we need to listen to fear’s message. Is it telling us that the realtor is giving us a bad deal or that being a homeowner is simply a new, unfamiliar role? Is our fear of commitment telling us that our dates belong in a psych ward or that real love always involves risk? Is our fear of quitting a boring job telling us that it’s not good to be out of work with \$100k in credit card debt, or that we’ll need more assurance that others will support us as we try something new?

Once we’ve brought in the other voices of logic, our desires, and our intimate community, we can figure out what the fear message is. Then, if fighting, fleeing, or freezing is not the appropriate response, we can practice intentional breathing and relaxation to chill out the fear until the dust settles and our Reptilian Brain returns to “at ease” long-term.

If you or someone you know would like some help working through lingering fear, *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.*

Thanks for reading!

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