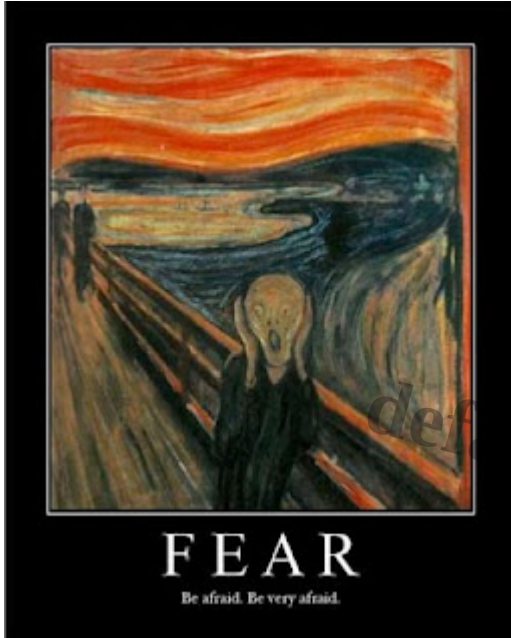


Fear Factor

Description



Fear is all around us: Whether it is a child afraid of the dark, a significant other petrified of heights or a friend terrified of public speaking.

It is everywhere.

Fear is good, for the most part. Biologically, it puts your body in a heightened state of awareness, allowing you to be ready for whatever situation comes your way, commonly referred to as the "fight or flight" response.

When you are scared, your body releases a cascade of chemicals (including catecholamine, acetylcholine and epinephrine) that cause a series of chemical reactions in your body that increase your heart rate, breathing and muscle tension. In essence, your body becomes primed to fight the fear, or take flight and escape.

Charles Darwin, in his book *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, describes the fear response with such amazing detail that I could not possibly do any better.

"Fear is often preceded by astonishment, and is so far akin to it, that both lead to the senses of sight and hearing being instantly aroused. In both cases the eyes and mouth are widely opened, and the eyebrows raised. The frightened man at first stands like a statue motionless and breathless, or crouches down as if instinctively to escape observation. The heart beats quickly and violently, so that it palpitates or knocks against the ribs. That the skin is much affected under the sense of great fear, we see in the marvellous manner in which perspiration immediately exudes from it. The hairs also on the skin stand erect; and the superficial muscles shiver. In connection with the disturbed action of the heart,

the breathing is hurried. The salivary glands act imperfectly; the mouth becomes dry, and is often opened and shut.â€•

â€œThe only thing we have to fear is fear itselfâ€•

As comforting as the subhead above, said by the former United States president Franklin Delano Roosevelt is, it can be difficult to realize that when you are paralyzed with fear. But, if you gather the courage and face your fears, like F.D.R. said, the emotion will no longer have control over you.

Like most people, I was scared of heights as a young child. It wasnâ€™t bad, but looking up at a high building or down a substantial distance would make me slightly nauseated and dizzy. All in all though, it was an easy situation to avoid.

Then, whether out of love or simply perverse pleasure, my older sister got it in her head to take me on a rollercoaster at an amusement park when I was a young kid. I was understandably a bit nervous leading up to it, and there may have been some crying and pleading while waiting in line. But, my sister strapped me in and we went up, up and up â€” before we succumbed to gravity and went down like a ROCK.

Up and down on the coaster we went â€” my sister screaming for joy and me just screaming.



Then, something switched in my brain. It began slowly at first but began picking up speed like the coaster I was on. Suddenly I found myself screaming, not out of fear, but out of joy. Slowly, as the day went on and we progressed to bigger and faster coasters, my fear began to ebb until it was eventually transformed into enjoyment. That is not to say that I wasnâ€™t still afraid of falling and such, but I could control my fear, embrace it and learn to enjoy the ride.

After that day, heights no longer scared me. I could go to the top of any skyscraper and look down with impunity, simply enjoying the view.

Then, three years ago this August, my brother Daniel and I did something that brought that fear right back to the forefront of my mind. If the tallest rollercoasters around didnâ€™t scare me, then the only

solution was to go bigger – three miles higher, to be exact.

It's not the fall that kills you, but the landing

We went to Las Vegas for a vacation and decided to strap ourselves into a parachute, board a small plane, and jump out in an activity known as skydiving.

The experience was an interesting one, as we got a safety demonstration on how to properly fall out of a plane, how to get into the proper free-fall position (arms and legs out, slightly elevated above your head) and how to land (legs out, akin to going down a slide).

Seeing as it was my first skydive, I needed to be attached to an instructor in what is known as tandem skydiving. My instructor, whom we will call Scott (not his real name), was a shaggy-haired man who had completed more than 100 jumps at the time that we met.

The next step was to put on a very uncomfortable dark blue flight suit, harness and helmet that made you resemble a cross between a sperm and a Smurf.



Meet Smurf Twin 1 and Smurf Twin 2

Then, my instructor attached a cable from his harness to mine, so we could never be more than a foot or two apart, which put the tandem in tandem skydiving. Following that, we marched to the plane with eight to 10 other “teams” and took our seats.

The plane was small and furnished with just a few benches: Scott and I sat at the very back of the plane, while Daniel and his instructor sat near the front. And just like that, we took off with a jolt to our destination three miles up and a few miles away from Las Vegas for our landing zone in the surrounding desert.

As we slowly spiralled up to our drop zone, the anticipation began to build and the fear began to manifest. I began to breathe heavily, followed by a light dusting of sweat on my forehead and hands, ending with my hands uncontrollably shaking.

“You nervous?” Scott asked, mildly concerned.

“No, yes, maybe,” I replied hesitantly.

“Any last words?” Scott said with a sly smile.

“I hope I don’t die.”

One small step

And then, as the plane levelled off, the inside cabin filled with silence. You could feel the tension rise in the air as all the skydivers looked out the windows at the blue sky that was revealed. We were so high that you could slightly see the curvature of the Earth.

“Three,” said the Captain over the loudspeaker. “Two. One.”

“Go!”

A deafening roar filled the plane as the front door was unlocked and all the air flew out of the cabin. The wind was so loud that all communication was done by hand signals as the first skydivers disappeared.

Staring with my mouth agape, I saw my brother saunter over to the window, look at me with absolute fear, and then he was gone. I thought I heard him scream, but that may have just been the wind howling in my ears.

Slowly, all the skydivers moved to the front door and fell out.

Contrary to popular belief, you don’t actually jump out of a plane. It’s more of a lean forward until you fall type of experience.

Scott lead me to the door, so I was staring out at the sea of blue and brown, before yelling in my ear, “Are you ready?”

“Do I really have a choice?” I screamed back.

Scott smirked.

“No.”

“Then let’s go!”

Scott then tilted my head back, and began to rock back and forth, edging closer to the open door.

“One.”

I breathed deeply to calm myself.

“Two.”

I thought: *This is really high.*

Three!

I leaned forward and fell into the blue.

Careful, that first step is a doozy

A very interesting realization occurred as I fell, headfirst, towards the ground. As I left the plane, the cold air (due to the altitude) bit at my face and cut through my flight suit like a knife as I plummeted down. The sensation of free-fall is incredible, and I had never (or have since) felt anything like it.

As thrilling as the experience was, I understandably screamed and screamed and screamed until no sound came from my mouth. The anxiousness I had felt leading up to the jump was replaced by adrenaline-inducing horror, which then made way for pure joy, as seen by the real video of my skydiving experience embedded below, for your viewing pleasure.

NOTE: At a point in the video, I pinch my nose and pop my ears due to the differential air pressure (like in an air plane) as I'm falling. While it looks rather silly, it needed to be done, as it could get extremely painful.

Embrace the fear

As you could see at the end of the video, I fell to the ground in a fit of hysterics that lasted for a good five minutes. I was so excited and pumped full of adrenaline, that I could not even walk in a straight line when I eventually found my footing.

It really brought to mind the old adage, that whatever does not kill you, makes you stronger. I always took a literal view of that saying, but I believe I understand it better after my skydiving experience.

Stronger does not necessarily reference the physical, but perhaps the emotional and mental. By facing my fear gradually (first roller coasters, then skydiving), I was able to emerge an individual stronger than I was before.

But, what's next?

After successfully falling out of a plane and landing safely, I thought there was nothing left to face. Until my sister found something entitled the [CN Tower Edge Walk](#).



The CN Tower, located in downtown Toronto, is a very large spire that is the world's fifth tallest free-standing structure that towers over the city at a height of over 550 meters (or 1,800 feet). And the Edge Walk is exactly what it sounds like: a walk along a 1.5 metre-wide ledge on the tower's highest pod, which rests approximately 350 metres above the ground.

Hopefully I will be able to think of better last words this time!

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