

Overcoming Fear and Worry

A person wearing a yellow shirt, shorts, and a climbing harness is standing on the peak of a large, jagged rock. They are holding a rope in their right hand and have their left arm raised. The background is a clear blue sky with scattered white clouds. The person is wearing a yellow shirt, shorts, and a climbing harness. They are holding a rope in their right hand and have their left arm raised. The background is a clear blue sky with scattered white clouds.

H. NORMAN WRIGHT

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A person in climbing gear is perched on a rock peak, holding a rope and raising their arms in a gesture of triumph or accomplishment. The background is a clear blue sky with light clouds.

CHAPTER ONE

Fear

It's an intruder. It's also an interference with everyday life. It can come and go at will and take the edge off of life. You've heard of a joy robber—well, this is it. At times there's a good reason for its presence, and then there are times when having it around doesn't make sense. What is this? Fear. It has the power to either immobilize or motivate, but in either case, it can cast a cloud over what may have been a positive experience.¹

We all experience fear to one degree or another. It can range from the smallest fear of not looking good enough to the concern of not getting home safely from school each day. Some of us talk about our fear, while others just live with its presence and remain silent about it.

While it's true that many feel secure today, that feeling could be a sense of false security. I have met with many in schools and companies who seem so secure but inwardly live with fear. I have sat with survivors of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, school shootings, and accidents, as well as those who seemingly lead everyday secure lives. I hear about fear, and the security we seem to experience can disappear in the blink of an eye.

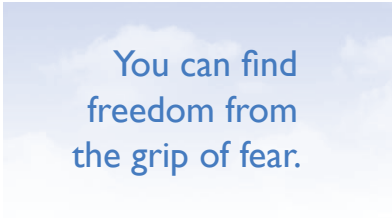
For many, the illusion of security that was lived with for so long has dissolved. Millions of Americans—as well as people in other countries—who never before experienced fear and panic now do.

Over the past decade, we have become more safety conscious. Many people used to let their kids run around the neighborhood, but now worries about stranger danger have made us more cautious. Many parents bring their children to school instead of sending them on the school bus; airports and places of business have increased security; and Coast Guard and Navy boats patrol our harbors and coasts.

The media pours frightening stories into our homes twenty-four hours a day, further eroding our feeling of safety. Just watch the news each night. It will intensify your fear!

We're the richest nation on earth. We've always found security in our savings, stocks, mutual funds, retirement, and so on. Until recently. Lately, major corporations have failed, pension plans have been drained, and the stock market has been erratic—these situations too feed our fear on a daily basis.

Each day I talk with people whose lives are filled with fear. Some of them have recently developed fears; others have lived in a prison of fear since childhood. The good news is that the prison doors of fear are unlocked! Remember, no matter how long you have been imprisoned behind its bars, you can find freedom from the grip of fear and walk away from it.



You can find
freedom from
the grip of fear.

WHAT IS FEAR?

Our English word *fear* comes from the Old English *faer*, meaning “sudden calamity or danger.” Fear has come to mean the emotional response to real or imagined danger.

The Hebrew word for fear can also be translated *dread*, meaning a heavy, oppressive sensation of fear.

A word we often interchange with fear is *anxiety*, which comes from the Latin *anxius*. To be anxious is to be troubled in mind about some uncertain event. A variation of *anxius* means “to press tightly or to strangle.” Anxiety is often a suffocating experience. Fear and anxiety are actually quite similar. A true fear has an identifiable object of danger, either real (a burglar in your house) or imagined (a shadow that looks like a burglar). When we’re anxious, we have the same feeling of fear, but we don’t know why.

We show our fear in different ways. Some people experience a sensation internally and show nothing on the outside. Others sweat, and their heart pounds. Some

people become unglued, start screaming, and run away. Others freeze and cannot move. Habakkuk the prophet experienced some of the common effects of fear:

*“I heard, and my [whole inner self] trembled,
my lips quivered at the sound. Rottenness enters
into my bones and under me [down to my feet];
I tremble.”*

— Habakkuk 3:16, AMP

Also, the skin can appear pale, hair stand on end, and blood pressure rise. There may be increased blood flowing through the muscles, causing greater tension; dryness and tightness of the throat and mouth; an increased need to urinate and defecate; butterflies flying in your stomach; a paralyzing weakness in the arms and legs; difficulty in breathing or a tightness in the chest. Scripture gives the same description of the results of fear and worry:

“Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down.”

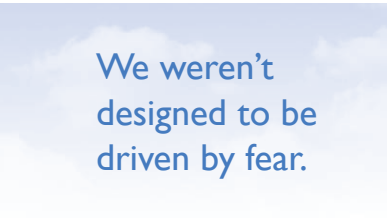
— Proverbs 12:25, AMP

RATIONAL AND IRRATIONAL FEARS

Fear of Life

All of us are afraid sometimes. That's normal. But some of us are fearful most of the time. That's *not* normal. We weren't designed to be driven by fear, yet some of us are. We weren't created to dread life, yet many of us do.

Occasionally, people tell me that they are afraid of death. That's not unusual, but even more people I talk to are afraid of life in one way or another. Living life to its full potential is a threat to them. They're emotionally



**We weren't
designed to be
driven by fear.**

paralyzed and refuse to participate in many of life's normal experiences. They hide and insulate themselves and throw away their opportunity

to live life. When counseling them, I often say, "It seems you're immobilized by fear," and they agree!

There's a difference between being afraid and being immobilized by fear. We may be afraid at times, but we're not to live our lives in fear. Paul wrote:

“For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid [fearful], but gives us power, love and self-discipline.”

— 2 Timothy 1:7

Isn't it strange for us to choose to imprison ourselves in fear, especially when Christ came to set us free?

The fear of life is actually more debilitating than the fear of death. Fear disables. Fear shortens life. Fear cripples our relationships with others. Fear blocks our relationship with God. Fear makes life a chore. We become the living dead. In the words of John Haggai, a leader in ways to overcome tough situations:

Having a fear is like having a cancer. It is always there, hidden inside you, always sapping your strength and breaking your concentration. Even rational fear can be destructive in its effects.

You cannot hide fear. Its destruction begins by feeding on you, and then moving into your social and physical environment.²

The fear of life is the fear of being hurt, being rejected, making a mistake, showing imperfections, and failing as a person. Fearing rejection is a common response for all of us as we grow up, but it becomes destructive when it continues and weaves its way into our adulthood. Somewhere along our path in life, we may subconsciously decide not to be vulnerable and never to take a risk. Before long we become turtles tucked inside a defensive shell of fear, immobile and detached from life. Like turtles, we'll only progress in life when we stick our necks out.

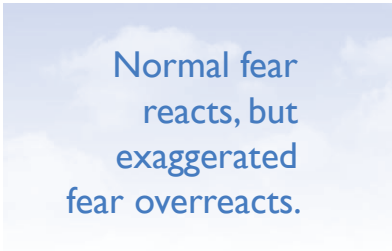
Exaggerated Fear

One day a friend and I were fishing at a mountain lake. We were working on a nice string of fish when it started to rain, and in just a few minutes the shower became a downpour. We hated to leave our fishing spot, but we decided that dry was better than wet. So we climbed

into my friend's car and drove up the mountain road.

As we ascended to a higher elevation, the rain turned to snow, and soon the snowstorm was heavy and intense. When we crested a slight hill, the car began an uncontrollable spin on the slippery road. I realized we were sliding helplessly toward a roadside cliff, so I reached to unbuckle my seat belt in order to jump out before the car slid over the edge. However, in a few seconds the car did a complete 360 and came to a stop in the middle of the road.

The life-threatening danger was over, but my friend and I had been plunged into a state of fear. There was nothing we could do about the way our bodies reacted; we had accelerated heart rates, a sinking feeling in our stomachs, and white, blood-drained skin. We stayed on edge emotionally as we crept down the hill into town, briefly losing control of the car on two curves.



Normal fear
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Our experience on the slick road illustrates a legitimate and rational fear: We could have lost our lives. But many who are plagued by irrational fear would end up exaggerating the danger of our close call and swear never again to go fishing, drive on a mountain road, or drive in the snow. An exaggerated fear is equipped with binoculars; it tends to magnify dangers that are a great distance away, making small threats appear large.

Normal fear reacts, but exaggerated fear overreacts. In many areas of the country, there seems to be larger-than-normal amount of danger and violence—freeway shootings, gang wars, kidnappings, and so forth. Most people react normally to these dangers by being cautious on freeways and avoiding some potentially dangerous areas of the city. But those with exaggerated fear overreact by confining themselves to their homes or neighborhoods.

Fear of Fear

Some people actually fear the sensation of fear itself, so they go out of their way to avoid all places and situations

that produce these sensations. Since they cannot avoid the involuntary knot in the stomach or the white (or sometimes flushed) complexion that accompanies a frightening experience, they avoid any setting in which these feelings might possibly occur. For example, someone who is afraid of loud and dominant individuals may overcompensate by avoiding meeting new people altogether.

Fear of Thoughts

Some people may not be afraid of their feelings but are afraid of their thoughts. Have you ever wished that a frightening thought would go away—or would never have entered your mind in the first place? *I'm going to forget the host's name, or I won't remember the opening lines of my presentation.* Occasional thoughts like these are normal and relatively harmless, but the persistent fear of these thoughts is abnormal.

COMMON FEARS IN DAILY LIFE

What part does fear play in your life? Let's consider daily life. Fears covers the gamut of human experience and includes fear of exams, spiders, darkness, mice, heights, and rejection—among hundreds of other things.

There are healthy and unhealthy fears. But do you know the difference? Healthy fears may prompt you to:

- Wear a seat belt in a plane or car to avoid injury.
- Wear a life jacket in a canoe on a river trip.
- Check with an expert before eating wild mushrooms.
- Ask a financial expert for advice before making investments.

Any of these normal concerns and fears could move into the unhealthy stage by never riding in a car, plane or canoe; never eating any mushrooms; never investing. Severe anxiety or fear hinders a person's performance. It can actually cause paralysis.

But what about the benefits of fear or anxiety? Many individuals in various professions have said that a mild degree of fear and anxiety increases their effectiveness. Actors, speakers, politicians, football players, salespeople, runners, and fighter pilots are a few of those individuals who feel they perform better with a certain amount of anxiety.

In an extreme crisis, however, fear may be so intense that the panic creates even greater trauma. A person running from a fire in a restaurant may run into the street without looking and be struck by a car. Too much fear brings mistakes. But too little fear can cause carelessness and even a disregard for dangerous situations. Firefighters can't be rash and careless, nor can army troops.

We were not created to live in a continual state of apprehension. Our lives are not to be a reflection of timidity and fear. You may want deliverance from fear, but you should not want deliverance from all of your fears. Fear is the fuel that moves you out of a dangerous situation. Positive fear can save your life. It is fear that

gnaws at your life and disrupts your sense of calmness that we seek to eliminate.

Much of our fear is directed toward possible eventualities, and here is where our fear changes into worry. A heart attack, the stock market collapsing, another world war, and the end of the world are all things that cannot be prevented by fearing them. The energy that we expend in fear and worry can keep us in a state of anxiety as it builds and swells within us. We end up being too afraid to live life!

What do you fear most—falling off a thousand-foot cliff? Being attacked and gored by a raging bull? Probably not. Unusual situations like these are not usually what frighten us. It is more the everyday events and people who threaten us to such an extent that our life is limited.

Whatever it is that you fear most, do you think you're the only one who feels that way? Think about yourself as you read about three common fears.

1. *Fear of rejection.* Rejection is feeling unaccepted by yourself, other people, or both. Somewhere in your lifetime you may have been treated like an unacceptable person. Someone, even a parent, may have seen you as a burden. If you were rejected as a child, you may either retreat from others or, out of your fear of rejection, seek approval so intense that you push others away.

Many people are afraid of socializing with others, especially strangers. They might be able to perform great feats and acts of courage, but they cringe when it comes to reaching out to people. Their fear of others cries out until other people become aware of their discomfort. Other people may just decide to leave such intense people alone, and then the discomforting people are left with the feeling of being rejected. Fear of reaching out to others and fear of being rejected go hand in hand.

Another way to experience rejection (and loneliness) is to avoid socializing and become a

recluse. You may feel a desperate need for affection and approval, but when love is offered, you reject it because you question its sincerity. A rejected person short-circuits any acceptance that is offered to him or her. Thus the fear the rejected person feels intensifies.

Fear is like that—it involves two kinds of pain. One kind is the pain of experiencing the situation, and the other kind comes from avoiding what you are afraid of. Either way the pain exists. What most of us do not realize, however, is that in the long run, the pain of doing something we're afraid of is less than the pain of avoiding it.

2. *Fear of failure.* Fearful people are often perfectionists. Their security comes from doing things better than anyone else. They either drive themselves and others up a wall in their quest for perfection or they listen to their fear and retreat. They fear ridicule from others and their own inner voices when they are not perfect.

If you're a perfectionist, you expend more effort than others yet feel no real satisfaction. In a sense you are a successful failure, continually striving to do better. You are never satisfied with yourself or others. Interruptions, disruptions, changes, irregularities, delays, and surprises are your enemies. Your theme song is strive, strive, strive—an endless treadmill.

There are times, though, when a perfectionist deals with his or her fear by retreating rather than striving. This perfectionist withdraws and hesitates, because the pain of failure is too much. By not trying, he or she can always think, *I can do it if I try, or I know I could really do it if I wanted to . . . or had the time.* But if he or she tries, that hope would be lost. Withdrawal becomes a protective cocoon.

The unreasonable demands of perfectionists placate their need to please themselves or others or to feel adequate and eliminate the fear of failure. But whatever is driving them has an insatiable appetite.

If you're a perfectionist, what or who are you afraid of? We can never achieve perfection in this life. We can become confident and, based on this confidence, do the best we can. Our confidence comes from a declaration from God Himself who has declared us to be adequate people. He did this through His Son, Jesus, and His work on the cross. Think about it.

3. *Fear of people.* One of the most common problems of life is the fact that one of our greatest fears is the fear of people. Imagine one person fearing another person—people fearing people. This fear comes in various shapes and sizes: and inferiority, shyness, and timidity all reflect this fear. Sometimes these fears become extreme and move into agoraphobia—the fear of being in public.³

THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF FEAR

How do our fears develop? They grow out of experiences or situations in our childhood. They may have been modeled for us by our parents, and in some ways we pattern our life after them. In many cases our childhood interactions with significant people form our response to others and to ourselves.

How much of what you do is motivated by fear? Do you know? Have you ever thought about how your life may be dominated by fear? Think about these statements and see if they apply to your own life:

- Fear of what others think about us keeps us from being friendly or speaking up in class.
- Fear of others getting more than us or a better position causes us to act impulsively, to try to beat others, or to devalue others by gossip.
- Fear of being controlled by others or of having to conform causes us to dominate others.

- Fear of sharing our weaknesses and inadequacies causes us to act like the strong silent type.
- Fear of failure keeps us in a life of mediocrity and boredom.
- Fear of financial ruin keeps us from wise investments and/or makes us dull and boring by our careful restrictive lifestyle.
- Fear of God makes us distort who he really is.

And the fears go on and on. What is your fear?
What does it cause you to do?

Two Great Motivators—Hope and Fear

There are two great motivating forces in life: fear and hope. Interestingly, both of these motivators can produce the same result.

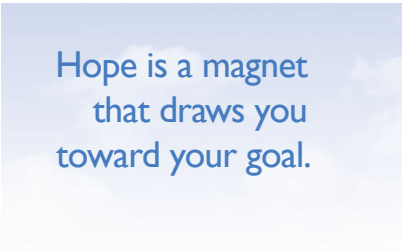
Fear is a powerful *negative* drive. It compels you forward while inhibiting your progress at the same time.

Fear is like a noose that slowly tightens around your neck if you move in the wrong direction.

Fear restricts your abilities and thoughts and leads you toward

panic reactions. Even when you're standing on the threshold of success, your most creative and inventive plans can be sabotaged by fear.

Fear is also like a video continually replaying your most haunting experiences: moments of embarrassment, rejection, failure, hurt, and disappointment. The message of the fear video is clear: Life is full of these experiences, and they will repeat themselves. Fear



Hope is a magnet
that draws you
toward your goal.

causes you to say, “I can’t do it; I may fail.” You have a constant sense of living in the grip of fear.

Hope is a totally different motivating force—a *positive* drive. Hope is like a magnet that draws you toward your goal. Hope expands your life and brings a message of possibility and change. It draws you away from the bad experiences of the past and toward better experiences in the future. The hope video continually replays scenarios of potential success. Hope causes you to say, “I can do it; I will succeed.” And it overrides “I don’t feel safe.”

What motivates you? What drives you? What pushes you ahead in life: fear or hope?
