

Lots of things. Talking to your boss. Speaking in public. Meeting women. Dancing. Dying. But here's the thing: According to the latest scientific thinking, each of these fears—from the mundane to the heart stopping—can be attributed to a case of evolution run amok. Here's how to trace terror back to its source and short-circuit your anxieties before they short-circuit you


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↑ [It's all about your inner animal.](#)

Men, What Are We Afraid Of?

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YOU KNOW THE FEELING. It's a genetic certainty you do. (Unless, that is, you're a sociopath and just happen to be reading this in the prison library.) Something that's scared you for as long as you can remember scares you again, despite your efforts rationalize your way around it. I've seen otherwise brave friends faint at the sight of a needle. Justin Timberlake is said to be

terrified of spiders. And John Madden, the football broadcaster whose career required constant travel, is so afraid of flying that he has spent thousands of hours crisscrossing America by bus.

For Eric, a fortysomething professional in New York City, the experience was especially potent. It began the same way each time, with a little vibrato in his stomach that escalated to hairs standing at attention, waving around in the brisk wind of his breath. His pulse quickened, he could feel the pounding of his heart, and in some of the worst cases, Eric began to sweat. You'd think he was an undercover cop, or one of those rangers assigned to tranquilize rogue lions in the Nairobi suburbs. But no. He was just a guy who had to pick up the telephone and make a cold call.

Now, all these cases—from JT to Eric—may sound extreme, but every man has experienced similar irrational responses to situations that hardly warrant them: say, walking into your superior's office to tell him you disagree with his decision, or asking a cute girl at a bar for her number. And the fact that Eric, the owner of a New York City project-management business, with twenty-one years of experience, can be reduced to a quivering mess by making a cold call (or even thinking about making one) reminds us that being afraid isn't just uncomfortable. It's detrimental. Fear, as much or more than any factor we self-destructing humans deal with on a regular basis, is holding us back—from bigger paychecks, better partners, and new experiences. In its chronic form, anxiety, it can be nearly crippling.

So what's going on here? Why are we such slaves to our anxiety? According to those who study the subject, it's not some neurological hiccup. Fear is a deeply ingrained by-product of evolution. And in our current context, that evolution has gone totally haywire.

What We're Afraid of and Why

OF THE FIVE basic emotion—the others are anger, sadness, love, and joy—fear is unique and arguably the most powerful. It's the biological defense system that nearly all animals have in common, one that is highly sensitive because, literally, our survival depends upon it. Or at least it used to. "We evolved the ability to feel fear and anxiety, and evolution only does that if it helps us," explains Michael Fanselow, who studies the nature and function of fear in his capacity as professor of psychology at UCLA's Brain Research Institute. "If you are an animal that will get preyed upon, you have to develop something to deal with that threat." That something is fear.



↑ Anxiety cures do not include Costanza-like desk hiding.

Over the hundreds of thousands of years of evolution from Cro-Magnon to modern man, these behaviors have proven so effective that we have virtually no control over them. They provide an instantaneous fight-or-flight alarm that has often meant, at least in the wild, the difference between life and death. And yet over time—especially in the extremely brief period since the onset of modernity and its comforts—this hair-trigger system has become less and less necessary, to the degree that there's now a massive disconnect between the software we're born with and the environment we inhabit. When Eric feels panicky and short of breath over a phone call, he's experiencing the exact sensation his far-distant ancestors felt when being stalked by saber-toothed tigers. This might very occasionally come in handy if you happen to walk into the wrong dark alley, but for the overwhelming majority of your life it causes far more problems than it solves.

Only a very few fears seem to be innate. One is a fear of heights, and the source of that one seems pretty obvious. (Falling!) Another is a fear of loud noises. (Giant boulder! Angry bear!) Most fears, then, are learned—quickly and powerfully—and the resulting memories are very hard to shake. It takes only a single traumatic memory to cement a fear, according to Fanselow. "You have one aversive experience and you immediately label that whole thing as dangerous," he explains. A toddler bitten by a dog probably won't remember the harrowing event, but there's a very good chance his adult self will be afraid of dogs because of it. A young man who draws his father's wrath is likely to cower rather than confront his dad in the future. And a soldier who survives a harrowing firefight can emerge with post-traumatic stress disorder, an extreme form of anxiety that causes him to fear certain sights or noises that recall the trauma.

Fanselow explains that we can view many of the fears we modern humans have in common through the prism of evolution, even the ones that don't seem obvious, including the kinds of things we encounter at the office: asking for raises, making

cold calls, or challenging superiors. To understand, we need only look to our fellow primates, which abide by dominance hierarchies. "Knowing your position in that hierarchy and keeping to it is very safe," he says, and since safety equates with survival, that's a powerful instinct. "To do things that come out of that hierarchy are very threatening." Asking your boss for a raise, he says, is exactly that. "You're going to the dominant animal and trying to get something from him. In evolutionary history, those are the peers that beat us up."

This same logic works for public speaking (often cited as the most commonly held fear in the modernized Western world),

CAN A PILL CURE FEAR?

→ Someday, perhaps in the not too distant future. But there are hurdles to overcome. Fear is controlled by the amygdala, a tiny almond-shaped hub in the frontal cortex, and lab experiments have proven that if this hub can be temporarily shut down, fear itself can also be shut down. (In the case of an experiment at the University of Washington, permanent removal of one rat's amygdala resulted in it no longer experiencing fear at all.) The problem, aside from setting loose packs of fearless morons, is that there's currently no way to deliver medicine directly to a very specific area of the brain without cutting open your brain and injecting it. So while taking a Valium, for instance, has the effect of turning off fear temporarily, it also makes you a zombie, because "we're also turning off a whole lot of things," according to Michael Fanselow of UCLA's Fear Lab. The magic bullet, he says, is a drug that hits only the amygdala and that changes fear memories without completely wiping out your mental hard drive. "You don't want a drug that will erase all memories."—J.D.

THE FEARLESS FOUR

→ What powerful men with extra-strength egos have said about tackling fear.



Donald Trump
“An interviewer asked me what my greatest fears were. I said I didn’t have any. He seemed surprised, but here’s the thing: labeling something as fear creates fear out of a concern.”



Sergey Brin
“I feel there’s an existential angst among young people. I didn’t have that. They see enormous mountains where I only saw one little hill to climb.”



Richard Branson
“Hiding from fear only makes it stronger. So enlist allies if necessary, and face your fears with a battle cry of ‘Screw it. Let’s do it!’”



Elon Musk
“When I was a kid, I was scared of the dark. But then I came to understand that the dark just means absence of photons. I thought: it’s silly to be afraid of the absence of photons!”

where you’re subjecting yourself to a large group of people who will be judging you, providing immediate feedback if you’ve hit or missed. Here, Fanselow says, the likely antecedent is a departure from the familiar, wherein an animal leaves an environment in which it is comfortable and enters another full of strangers. In this situation, too, the interloper could end up attacked.

“I think instinctively we are born afraid to face a lot of people, because evolution-wise, that means we were being hunted,” says Jeansokk Kim, who runs the fear lab at the University of Washington. “Those kind of fears are ingrained in your brain and are really hard to overcome.”

Scientists call fears without obvious antecedent—for instance, an inability to confront co-workers—“illogical fears,” which result in what psychologists refer to as phobias. And these, of course, extend far beyond the office. My wife hates flying but has never been in a crash. (And flying is statistically safer than driving.) I get anxious about dancing but have never been beaten for doing it poorly. And plenty of people seize up in the presence of snakes and spiders, even if they’ve never been bitten (or chased, or hissed at).

Mona Lisa Schulz, an M.D. in behavioral neuroscience, explains the phenomenon of illogical fear as a “corrupted file that you downloaded by accident that keeps coming up.” And that file, scientists say, is impossible to erase. Schulz notes that fear is so powerful, so deeply ingrained, that it is immune to pharmaceutical treatment. While there are numerous drugs that work for depression, nothing really works on fear for any extended period; benzodiazepines like Valium and Xanax provide more of a total body/mind numbing rather than targeting just the anxiety, and they decrease in efficacy over time, making them highly addictive. SSRIs and beta blockers, both of which have proven helpful in relieving symptoms of anxiety, only work as long as you keep taking them. You’re hiding the symptoms, not treating the cause.

But this doesn’t mean that the situation is hopeless. There is a way to treat your fear: by hacking your own mental hard drive.

A Cure for Common Fear

1. REWRITE THE SCRIPT: Schulz specializes in eradicating fears among the alpha dogs of business, the so-called C-level executives (CEOs, CFOs, etc.) who, despite being rich and powerful and married to beautiful women half their age, have the same problems as the rest of us. She starts by helping them recognize when the body’s fear response kicks in, and she teaches them to short-circuit the process by import-

ing a new file to override or at least compete with the corrupted one that’s tickling the fear instinct.

The effect is to “dilute the message,” she says. So when you hear, for instance, a little voice saying, “I’m afraid to ask for a raise because I might be rejected and humiliated, and then it’s only a matter of time until I’m fired for being undeservedly brazen, at which time I’ll have to give up my apartment, take a job at Cracker Barrel, and move home to my parents’ garage, where I’ll raise beer money by selling bottle-cap necklaces on Etsy,” you’ve trained another voice to pipe up and drown it out. This voice should be the more rational one, reminding you of why you’re going to go through with the thing that you’re afraid to do in the first place. It might say something that directly contradicts the fear thought. In this case, Schulz recommends an old standby: Make a list of the value you’ve added—noting, say, that you won new accounts totaling \$200,000 or that you led a project that was singled out for an award.

Every neuroscientist and therapist I spoke with talked about working around fear and fear memories by introducing conflicting thoughts. “You specifically have to teach the brain a new memory, that this situation is not one that should provoke fear,” Fanselow said. “It’s an interfering memory that says, ‘No, it’s actually safe.’”

In the case of Eric the project manager, it was a matter of stripping down the situation—with the help of his therapist, Jonathan Alpert, author of *Be Fearless: Change Your Life in 28 Days*—to recognize how trivial his root fear was. “It was a fear of rejection,” Eric says. “The key is to see it.”

2. DON’T DODGE: Clearly there’s nothing actually dangerous about rejection. No one has ever been mortally wounded by a

rude businessman on the phone or a dismissive woman at the bar, but for certain people the biological reaction to the possibility of rejection feels as if that’s the case. And what’s worse is that there’s an easy solution: You avoid the situation. Avoiding it feels good. It lessens stress. And in turn it intensifies the fear. “The more you avoid something you’re afraid of, the stronger that fear is,” Alpert says.

You might know the spooky voodoo of avoidance from your own adult relationships. Imagine that little ripple of tension you’ve got with your wife or brother or father. The longer it lies dormant, the worse it gets. Confronting the matter is awful enough, but over time the act of avoiding it becomes more and more awful, until you start to feel the tension infecting more and more of your psyche.

Once Eric knew it was rejection he feared, he could confront the threat. “It’s okay to be rejected,” he says now. “Not everybody is going to like you. And once you see it in front of you, you can say, ‘Well, that’s kinda dumb.’” Until he was able to do that, however, “it was this bogeyman, this unnamed thing.” His therapist, Alpert, helped by pointing out that the worst possible outcome wasn’t really bad at all. Eric might not get the business, but he would at least have introduced his name. “You’re there because you’re supposed to be there,” Eric says he came to realize. “It’s not like you’re breaking into somebody’s house.”

3. DO IT FAST: One thing that is nearly always true is that “it’s never as bad as we fear,” says Randy Gage, a professional speaker who travels widely, lecturing to crowds of up to 10,000 about prosperity and success. One cure, obviously, is what Eric did. Another, Gage says, is to avoid overthinking. “If you have to break up with



↑ Remember: your boss is not really going to beat you to prove dominance.

someone or fire someone, the best way to do it is as quickly as possible.”

The more time you have to think about something, the more you will think about it, and your mind is your own worst enemy when it comes to fear. Gage says that “most people’s default setting is negative—this so-called “negativity bias” is something therapists often talk about—and that you need to be conscious of working around it. If you’re single and afraid of approaching a woman in a bar, chances are it’s because you’ve already imagined what her response might be: that you’re too old or short or bald. “You’ve totally invented that,” Gage says. “It has no basis in fact.” Instead, he says, “Choose to create an empowering script.”

Alpert likes to tell his clients to prepare for stressful situations the way an athlete would. “If every time Michael Phelps got on the starting blocks he thought, ‘I’m not good at this,’ he’d never win a race.” If you’re

“You can choose to allow fear to cripple you,” says adventurer Jeb Corliss, “or you can fight through that fear and just take a risk.”

about to give a speech and you approach the podium worrying that you’ll stumble over your words, you probably will. Instead, prepare enough that you’re feeling confident and then remind yourself that you know the material, that you’re giving this presentation for a reason. As Gage points out, “No one wants you to fail less than the audience. They want you to be good.”

Harnessing Fear

ONCE YOU TAME FEAR, you realize something else: It doesn’t have to be your enemy. That’s one secret of high achievers,

who, psychologists say, tend to have high anxiety thresholds. They not only tolerate fear on a day-to-day basis; they actually use it to their advantage, experiencing that nervy buzz as energy instead of stress. If you spend time around many film producers, tech entrepreneurs, or hedge-fund guys, you’ll notice that many of them share an interest in dangerous hobbies. They race cars. They ride motorcycles. They fly planes. Regular old skiing often isn’t good enough—they need first descents accessed by helicopter. It’s not that people like this are fearless; they just interpret fear differently.

Few people on earth have learned to handle fear and anxiety better than Jeb Corliss, arguably the world’s most famous BASE jumper and wing-suit pilot, meaning he voluntarily throws himself from safe perches into harm’s way. When I spoke to Corliss, he was in the final stages of recovering from a crash six months before that should have killed him. While proximity flying in South Africa—soaring downhill in close proximity to the terrain, wearing a wing suit—Corliss made what he calls “a stupid mistake” and flew directly into the rocks, wearing only spandex, at 120 miles per hour. The least surprising part of this story is that once doctors told the 36-year-old that he wouldn’t have to have his legs amputated—after immediately telling him that he would—Corliss wanted to jump again.

Corliss is such an extreme case of an intentional risk taker that it’s easy to dismiss him as an aberration, but what’s driving him is not so unusual. “When the fearless feel what most of us call ‘nerves,’ they don’t think, ‘This is horrible, I’m going to die,’ says Alpert, who sometimes sees people like this in his practice. “To the contrary, they accept nerves as a normal part of life and as a healthy physiological response.” In fact, he points out, fear and

excitement are nearly identical, physiologically speaking. In large part, the difference is how the person experiencing those sensations perceives them. Apparently fearless people, Alpert says, “recognize that their system is getting revved up and enjoy these sensations. It is what makes them feel alive and gets them out of bed in the morning.”

“In a dangerous situation, your body releases chemicals like adrenaline and endorphins,” Corliss says. “These make the body operate at a higher speed” and in turn “everything else feels like it’s slowing down.” This is what people often say about near-death experiences—that time slows down. But Corliss says it’s actually the opposite; it’s your mind speeding up so “you can react better and get shit done. You need that fear to operate at optimal levels.”

Corliss is very conscious that he’s overtly courting fear, chasing it even, and he’s spent a lifetime trying to understand how to use the feeling instead of being controlled by it. “I believe every person has a gift,” he says. “My gift has been fear.” Corliss explains that there are two kinds of fear—anticipation fear, or the fear of what’s (maybe) going to happen in the future, and a more real fear triggered by actual danger. He’s trained himself not to waste time with anticipation fear, which is a clever trick the brain uses to start talking us out of danger before we even encounter it. To overcome it, he says, you need to have an interior dialogue in which you convince yourself there’s no point in worrying about a situation that hasn’t yet presented itself.

Corliss thinks that what he’s learned is applicable to all of us, because he sees fear as the basis of almost all weakness; it’s the thing keeping us from ending a spoiled relationship or quitting a job that sucks: “You can choose to allow fear to cripple you, or you can fight through that fear and just take a risk.” It’s a conversation he has with himself all the time, even in legitimately perilous situations. Because even when he’s standing on the top of a mountain preparing to proximity fly at 120 miles per hour, most of the fear he’s feeling is irrational. “I have to listen to it and decide, am I really in danger right now? Or am I just scared for the sake of being scared?”

That’s some high-stakes hairsplitting, but Corliss’s point is that he’s so confident in his preparation and so in tune with the environment, that he can distinguish between a fear that’s real—something about the circumstances feels wrong because it is—and one that’s just his body saying, “Dude, you’re nuts! Let’s go have a beer instead.” “It just so happens that 99 percent of the time that’s it,” he says. “It’s just scary. You have no reason to be scared.”

JOSH DEAN *is afraid of thetktk.*