

Our Internal Alarm Clock

Another helpful way to think about fear is as an alarm clock. When we hear the alarm clock of fear, it is there to get our attention, to wake us up to the need to become more conscious. But once we are awake we don't let our alarm clock keep ringing. The ringing would be annoying and unnecessary and would disrupt the tranquillity of our day, just as sustained fear disrupts the tranquillity of our minds.

It is only upon reflection that we learn what set off the alarm: either our faulty thinking or a need to take remedial action. The alarm clock of fear may be trying to wake us up to the fact that our own thoughts are terrorizing us. It may be trying to tell us that these thoughts are only a remnant of the past and have nothing to do with our present circumstances, and that we need to let go of them. Conversely, fear may be waking us up to our need to reflect or act on a problem with our job, or a parenting issue, or a financial decision, or the threat of imminent danger.

When we view our fearful thoughts from a fully awake, conscious mind, we have the wise power of discernment on our side. When we are conscious and aware, we can also see if there is anything we need to do to change or prepare for a situation. But if we keep the alarm of fear ringing while we are attempting to discern what to change or do, the ringing of fear in our heads will become a distraction and cause more fear. That is why it is best to listen to fear only long enough to wake up, and then remember that behind it is information as to what, if anything, to change or do.

Blinded by Fear

Many years ago, I taught people about the power of fear through rock climbing. My colleague and I would take people climbing to help them learn about themselves and how to work with and trust others. Initially, the fear of falling down the cliff would often paralyse people emotionally or keep them stuck on one part of the climb for a very long time. To them, the rock looked impossible to climb, though it was actually quite easy and safe. The fear of falling and possibly dying kept them from seeing the easy route up the mountain. It also kept them from enjoying the experience.

From time to time, my colleague and I would do an experiment and blindfold the participants during a climb. This was not a cruel hoax, but an opportunity to demonstrate how fear blinds us to opportunity. (The participants were, of course, safely tied in with a rope.) We would instruct them to feel the rock to find a handhold or foothold, completely dependent on the sense of touch. They were amazed at how easy it was to find a hold in the same place on the rock that had looked impossible to them a moment before when they had the use of their vision. They had been blinded by their fearful thoughts of what might happen, distracted by the constant ringing of the fear alarm in their heads. The initial sensation of fear, however, was meant to alert them to the necessity of thinking through the details of proper knot tying and other safety issues in order to protect themselves, but not to obsess on the danger.

When we don't understand that fear is our wake-up call to become more conscious, we can become immobilized by it. Instead of taking in information that is crucial for our safety and well-being, our unchecked fear blinds us to opportunities for dealing effectively with danger and the unknown. Unconscious fear keeps us trapped in our belief systems and past experiences, thus limiting our ability to think creatively and boundlessly in the moment. In our current world of terror, in which we worry about not only violent attacks, but about issues such as global warming and mass starvation, it behoves us to act not from fear and panic but from wisdom and clear, calm resolve.

When we recognize that being in a state of fear means that we are caught in our own ego thoughts, we are able to let go of the thinking that is creating the fear. It is then that the obvious possibilities before us reveal themselves. From a calm and clear state of mind, we are able to solve problems, respond to real danger in an intelligent and responsive manner, avoid hurting others or ourselves, and increase our chances for survival and a healthy, successful life. ■ ■

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Find Joe at www.joebaileyandassociates.com*