

Two Ways to Work with Fear

This is a scary time, plain and simple.* And right now, the main message we are getting is that we need to be “hiding out.” Less time with other people and more time to think and worry means that we are at risk of getting caught up in negative thoughts and emotions. Many physicians who have been taking calls from patients report having had many more calls related to anxiety and fear than about preventing or treating COVID-19.

What are some ways to work with fear? Here are two options:

1. Calming Emotions: “Name it to Tame it.”

The phrase “name it to tame it” is from author Shauna Shapiro.¹ She makes the point that to work with a challenging emotion, like fear, one of the most important things we have to do is notice it -and name it- in the first place. We are wired to *feel* an emotion before we ever *think* about it. Only by looking straight at our emotions do we have the power to really work with them.

A few years back, there was a study on students that looked at what happened to their brains if they focused on naming emotions they saw in pictures of people.² This was compared to what happened when they named something else about the pictures that was not related to emotions. Naming emotions calmed the students’ brains down, while naming other things did not. And the same thing happens when we name our own emotions – we calm down. So how can we use that to help ourselves?

When something is uncomfortable, whether it is an emotion or pain, or some sort of symptom, it may be that that best course is to face it. To really know it. In terms of fear, that means being aware that you have it, naming it, and then understanding more about it. Where do you notice it in your body? How does it show up? Tightness? Tension? Clenching? What triggered it in this moment? Have you felt the same thing before? What are some associated thoughts or stories that may be going on in your mind? Can you observe it with curiosity and allow it to be, just as it is, right in this moment? What helps it go away? The more you know, the more power you will have to work with it. It may not always mean getting rid of it, but it can always mean learning how to cope with it better.

If we do not name our emotions, it can cause problems. We can try to ignore them or bury them, but that can be a lot like playing a game of Whack-A-Mole – we knock the emotion down, but it pops up somewhere else. In one study, people who ignored their feelings found that the feelings actually stayed around longer.³

*This handout was developed in March, 2020 in response to currently active worldwide COVID-19 pandemic

Not only that, but they did worse on memory tests. On the other hand, changing how they looked at a situation – the researchers called it “reappraising” – kept the feelings from having so much power.

It may help to explore what you are feeling by doing some writing, as follows.

Calming Your Emotions: 3-Minutes of Noticing

Get something to write with and some paper, or be ready to type on a computer or tablet. Make sure you can watch a clock or set a timer. Once you are ready, take a moment to tune in to what you feel *right now*. It may be fear, or it might be something else. What do you notice in your body? What catches your attention? What triggers this emotion? Do you want to change it? How can you? Write freely – anything that seems helpful.

After the time is up, look over what you wrote. What came up for you? What did you learn?

2. Getting out of Fight or Flight Mode: Managing Fear with Your Breath

The first activity focused on settling your emotions, and that can help settle your body down too. There are other things you can try to calm the body as well. Being afraid makes us shaky, speeds up our heart and breathing rates, and ultimately taps our energy. Yes, it is good to be in fight or flight mode if there is a bear after you, but feeling that way a lot of the time, is hard on us. On the flip side, feeling relaxed and at peace is good for our health.

One way to shift from revved up to settled down is to breathe in a way that activates your vagus nerve. The vagus has branches that run from your heart and lungs and other organs to your brain. You can do things that will trigger the vagus to send a message to your brain that it can get out of fight or flight mode. “Hey, Brain! It is okay right now.”

How does that happen? One way is if by adjusting how fast we breathe. Breathing at a certain speed can help us shift into a calmer state. Everyone has a breathing rate that works for them, and this can take some practice, but many people find it helps pretty quickly. We have seen this tool help people stop panic attacks, get them relaxed before a medical procedure, or simply settle down when something is making them stressed.

As you use the tool, keep three things in mind:

1. If at any point you become uncomfortable or feel short of breath, stop the activity and take a break.
2. Focus on breathing in all the way down to your belly. It should expand on the inbreath, which means that you are using your diaphragm, the main muscle that helps us breathe. This is important for activating the vagus nerve.
3. This takes practice. It is normal to have it get easier after you practice it for a while.

Breathing Away Fear

Do this exercise with a timer or a clock with a second hand. Your goal is to slow your breathing down. *Only do what your body is comfortable with.* Most people have a “sweet spot” where if they breathe at a rate of about 1 breath every 10-12 seconds, their body will really calm down. Even slowing breathing just a little can make a difference. Take as much time as you need.

It should never feel stressful to do this – if it does, don’t breathe quite so slowly. Remember to breathe using your abdomen, not just your chest muscles. Many people also find it helps to make the outbreath longer than the inbreath. That is, bring in for about a third of the time and out for two thirds of it.

What do you notice? Try this at least three times during the day.

President Franklin Roosevelt said, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” When he was asked about this later, he pointed out that yes, we do have good reason to have fear sometimes. But fear is our biggest enemy if we get stuck in it and freeze up, so that we can’t take action. Part of beating the COVID pandemic is facing...and naming...and working with... our fear. Fear is normal. Fear signals us to do what we can to stay safe. Let fear be something that motivates you to take action, not something that shuts you down. **You can do this!**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health	A variety of handouts on mindful awareness	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/
Whole Health Institute	Whole Health resources	Coming Soon!



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References

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