

Fear

"An intense emotional state caused by specific external stimuli and associated with avoidance, self defense, and escape."

Fear is one of the primary emotions, together with joy, **anger**, and grief. Fear generally refers to feelings elicited by tangible, realistic dangers, as opposed to anxiety, which often arises out of proportion to the actual threat or danger involved. Fear may be provoked by exposure to traumatic situations, observations of other people exhibiting fear, or the receipt of frightening information. Repeated or prolonged exposure to fear can lead to disorders such as combat fatigue, which is characterized by long-term anxiety and other emotional disturbances.

Fear is accompanied by a series of physiological changes produced by the **autonomic nervous system** and adrenal glands, including increased heart rate, rapid breathing, tenseness or trembling of muscles, increased sweating, and dryness of the mouth. Blood is diverted from other parts of the body to the areas where energy is most needed, either to run from danger or to forcibly protect oneself, a reaction known as the "fight or flight" response. This sudden diversion of excess blood from the cerebral cortex of the **brain** may also cause fainting, which in animals may actually serve an adaptive function to protect them from predators. In the 1880s, **William James** concluded that the physiological changes associated with fear actually constitute the **emotion** itself (e.g., "we are afraid because we tremble"), a view that has been challenged by cognitive psychologists since the 1950s.

Fears first appear in human infants at about seven months of age. Young children generally have more fears than older persons and their fears are experienced more intensely. Within families, studies have shown that middle children as a group experience fewer fears than older or younger siblings. Researchers have disagreed about the extent to which fear is innate or learned, with behaviorists arguing that it is largely learned. Animals have been conditioned to fear previously neutral stimuli through various methods including association, the exposure to paired neutral and fear-producing stimuli to the point where the neutral stimuli become associated with fear, even when presented alone. Certain innate fears such as fear of loud noises, **pain**, and injury appear to be universal. Species-specific innate fears have also been documented, including a fear of hawk-like shapes in certain animals and a fear of snakes in humans and other primates.

When a person confronts real dangers, fear can be an important means of self-preservation. However, many people are plagued by chronic and unrealistic fears, including phobias and obsessions, that cause much unnecessary distress and can severely reduce their ability to function normally in society. While it is possible to reduce pathological fears through drug treatment, the results are temporary and drugs do not address the root cause of the problem. **Mental health** professionals offer various types of psychological treatment that either attempt to deal with the underlying cause of the fear through a psychodynamic approach or address the fear directly through behavioral therapy. Behavioral techniques include **desensitization** (gradually increasing exposure to the feared object), flooding (sudden, intensive exposure to the feared object or stimulus), and **modeling** (observing another person being exposed to the feared object without being harmed).

Bemis, Judith. *Embracing the Fear: Learning to Manage Anxiety and Panic Attacks*. St. Paul, MN: Hazelden, 1994.

Forgione, Albert G. *Fear: Learning to Cope*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977.

Nardo, Don. *Anxiety and Phobias*. New York: Chelsea House, 1991.