

Phobophobia: The Fear of Being Afraid—and its Cure

You're all alone in a beautiful, open meadow breathing the fresh air, watching butterflies flit among the wildflowers. At the field's edge where the woods form a shadowy line, a solitary deer grazes. Suddenly—an earsplitting noise from a four wheeler interrupts the afternoon solitude. The deer's head bolts upright, then just as quickly the deer vanishes into the woods in three quick bounds, its tail upright flagging quick, stochastic movements.

No, I'm not going to turn this into a novel. But I wanted you to experience an immediate calm-to-fear state exhibited by a wild animal that is always on the edge of flight. It's a safety mechanism hardwired into the deer to preserve its life from predators.

Fortunately for us, we have the same mechanism in our limbic brains centered in our amygdala, usually exhibited as flight (safety) or fight (courage). To be sure—not quite the same automatic response as a flight animal. More importantly, in our brain's neocortex, a higher level of conscious thought takes place. Our ability to have this conscious thought enables us to change our mindset. So we can consciously go from fear to courage or trust or calmness simply by our awareness of being in a fear state of mind.

One of the best lessons I ever learned years ago from one of my mentors was his definition of fear, as it relates to money. He explained that the majority of time we tend to be in a fear state of mind. This fear state has to do with one of two possible future outcomes.

Either we are afraid we are going to lose something we have, or we are afraid we are not going to get something we want. Either of these future possibilities of losing something, or not obtaining something, can and usually does put us into a state of fear.

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're saying to yourself, "I'm not afraid. I'm not in a fear state. I've got my act together. Fear is something I gave up after I became an adult."

Well, maybe yes, maybe no.

A very smart man once said to me, "Gary, all progress starts by telling yourself the truth."

Like many other people, I'm all about the future, about progress, about moving forward and about learning. But, we're also all about confidence, clarity, calmness, courage, happiness and ease.

Guess what the antonyms to fear are? That's right, everything in the prior paragraph plus joy, trust, comfort, love, fearlessness, heroism, and other emotions.

Heroes are people who overcome their fears when others are shivering, shaking and running for cover.

We're not trying to be heroes. This just illustrates the unique nature of human beings and our ability to recognize when we're fearful, and consciously decide to take action from a thoughtful, intentional state of being.

Turning off the fear mode and turning on, in



“Every day I live in fear that our jobs will be replaced by pillows.”

order, acceptance, courage and commitment empowers us to move forward – thereby robbing fear of its negative bias toward seeking safety and its focus on scarcity, protectionism, incremental limited scope, and so forth.

Recently, a business owner approached me about a situation he was noodling through.

He was trying to determine if he should add two new team members to help expand his business, and was concerned about how he was going to pay them based on his current and expected revenue. A fairly common situation for a small, growing business.

I almost started to answer his question – then it occurred to me that maybe he wasn’t fully thinking through this business decision. I asked him, “What state of mind are you currently in?” He looked at me quizzically and answered, “What do you mean?”

I mentioned the two situations that can put us into a fear state of mind, and noted that if he was in this state – which it appeared he was based on the way he was describing his business decision – it is a bad place to be when making such a major decision.

After a little discussion, he agreed he was in a fear state of mind. He felt he would lose money or, worse, lose his business with this

decision. Once he recognized his current fear state he immediately changed his thinking.

The key is not to make a decision while in a fear state of mind!

About now, you might be thinking this whole fear state of mind thing is a bunch of hooey. Well, let’s say there are obstacles in front of you that hinder you from moving forward. Until those obstacles are removed by your intentional and deliberate action, progress cannot resume.

There’s a very strong basis for our regular fear state of being.

Toddlers crawl, then take their first steps, fall, get up, then fall again and again until mastering walking. The same for tying shoes, riding a bike, hitting a baseball, and so forth.

The fear state, the fear of failure – phobophobia – is almost nonexistent for our very young. So what happens between early childhood and now, as adults, that causes us angst and indecision when we consider taking on new risks?

You may agree or disagree – here’s my hunch: Our formal, factory designed, born-on-a-certain-date school system is a relic of the 19th century Industrial Revolution when things were incremental, sequential, finite, structured, packaged and delivered. Maybe that has something to do with how we handle fear as adults.

You see, placing a gold star on the forehead of a five or six year old who just correctly spelled 10 words that were assigned for study beforehand is as far from the real world as it can possibly be.

This education process for up to two decades or more is a preset program designed for perfection: 100%, A plus, 4.0. However, perfection does not exist in the real world! (Where even a 70% completion on the first crack at something new is outstanding!)

Formal education is so distant from the real world that we as a company watch our newly minted college graduates go through a really tough first year on the job. There's disappointment, failure and a sobering wakeup call that things just don't work out the way they thought they would. It's hard to watch, but it is hard reality for young people who come out of today's old style, industrial system of learning.

School tries to knock out the fear of failure.

We've institutionalized a presumptive antidote for the fear of failure. Provide me with what I need to learn to pass or max an exam and I will study, then take the test. But isn't that an extremely limited microscopic view into the real world?

Sometimes it's not a bad thing. Fear is our default mode. It's necessary for survival in the fight or flight moments. But, they are few and far between.

It's just that we need to recognize sooner than later our adult condition, our inclination and pre-disposition, in this real, imperfect, fast-changing, fast-paced world.

In Silicon Valley and throughout the fast-paced, start-up business world, there is a saying about how to keep succeeding: "Fail forward."

Failing forward is how we learn. It has always been that way. It is our fear of failure that actually places us in a fear state of mind. This has a sort of inward, spiraling downward, self-propelling-prophecy-of-doom effect that resembles a coiled spring tightening until it explodes.

— That mimics a fear-related decision.

Our automatic response — our "frightened deer in the meadow" — is to head for safety. To hunker down, to move away, to stop, to sometimes retire

Failure seldom stops you. What stops you is the fear of failure.

— JACK LEMMON

Those toddlers and young children failed miserably over and over again. To walk upright, bipedal, is something only human beings have mastered. It takes years of learning to balance, gait, use muscle control, and smoothly transition from prone, to seated, to walking, to jogging and then running.

Long story short, we have lost our innate awareness and our inbred, instinctive, intuitive thoughtfulness when it comes to fear.

This adult condition is ubiquitous in our society, installed in us through every media outlet, every person we meet, everything we hear, read and digest.

prematurely. These reactions are instinctual, not predictive or permanent.

I find myself in a fear state of mind every day. However, I now recognize it faster and intentionally pull myself out of that state and strive to move forward.

There's a certain confidence, clarity, openness to change and unanticipated calm that occurs once we move ourselves from a state of fear to these other states of mind and being.

Fear is one of our strongest emotions. Its antonym emotions include joy, happiness, trust, courage and comfort.

Our state of mind and our state of being are critical to our success when it comes to dealing with money.

In the money business, we see plenty of fear. It does present itself, especially during bear markets, or with the loss of a job or a loved one, or with other painful life transitions.

Acknowledging some level of fear, then accepting this state of mind, equips us to then decide what state of mind we want to be in. Fear can be so crippling that one can't even summon the will to do anything to move forward.

A great way to think about fear:
"Everything you want is on the other side of fear." I read this somewhere a long time ago and it has stuck with me.

Fear is an obstacle. It always appears. It's the oldest and strongest emotion of human beings. It's called Life. What you DO about it is what matters.

We can fritter away our lives with our fears, but there are no do-overs allowed. Down deep, we instinctively know that the other side of fear is

freedom and progress.

"We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light." Plato said that. Until we conquer our fears, we can't act.

"To him who is in fear, everything rustles." Another Greek, Sophocles, wrote that. When that startled deer I mentioned earlier darted for the woods, I was momentarily surprised by the loud four wheeler. But almost instantly I knew the combustion engine's noise posed no threat. Those colorful butterflies dancing among the wildflowers again drew my calm attention.

The story goes, one night during a severe thunderstorm a mother tucked her young son into bed. She was just about to turn off the light when he asked in a trembling voice, "Mommy, will you stay with me tonight?" Smiling, the mother gave him a warm, reassuring kiss and said tenderly, "I can't dear. I have to sleep in Daddy's room." A long silence followed. Finally it was broken by a shaky voice saying, "The big sissy!"

TECHNOLOGY
NIGHT

YOU'VE GOT QUESTIONS.
WE'VE GOT ANSWERS.



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Gary W. Klaben

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2700 Patriot Blvd, Ste 440, Glenview, IL 60026
316 W. Roosevelt Rd #100, Wheaton, IL 60187
801 Laurel Oak Drive #403, Naples, FL 34108
847 441-5644 | Toll Free 800 480-7913 | [CoyleFinancial.com](https://www.CoyleFinancial.com)