

Fear: Instinct or emotion?

President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “The only thing to fear is fear itself.” Fear is a core element that is tremendously powerful. Fear is defined as an emotional response induced by a perceived threat, which causes a change in brain and organ function, as well as in behavior. Fear can lead people to hide, to run away, or to freeze in their shoes. Fear may arise from a confrontation or from avoiding a threat, or it may come in the form of a discovery. Fear can cause a person’s instincts to take over, or it can limit a person’s ability to perform certain activities. In extreme situations, fear can even cause imaginary scenarios. In short, there are many ways that fear changes behavior and drives action.

One of the ways that fear drives action is by triggering a person’s instincts. According to article “The Complexity of Fear”, “...fear immediately leads to an urge to defend [oneself] with escape from an impending disaster” (Lamia 2). In other words, a person’s instincts exist for self-preservation and when people feel threatened, their instincts immediately take over. Additionally, the author explains that “the notion of “fight or flight” is considered a fear response and describes the behavior of various animals when they are threatened—either hanging around and fighting, or taking off in order to escape danger” (2). This fact shows that the fear response of “fight or flight” is in a person’s make-up. Hence, if people are suddenly frightened or startled, their instincts will take over, causing action on impulse.

Additionally, fear can limit people’s abilities to perform certain activities or visit certain places. For example, Julia Butterfly Hill states in the article “Fear is Simple and Profound” that “Fear will shut down the voice of the heart and spirit and collapse [people] into beings without meaning and without value” (1). To summarize her theory, fear is strong enough to influence thoughts and decisions and it can even become detrimental. In the article “The Complexity of

Fear” Lamia explains how “These emotions can transform into behaviors that can lead [a person] to avoid situations or into defense mechanisms that may obscure the recognition of reality” (Lamia 1). This reveals how fear is actually powerful enough to change daily routines and lifestyles. Unfortunately, fear can shut people down, make them miserable, negatively influence decisions, and damage lives.

Lastly, fear is so powerful that it can cause imagined scenarios. Mary Lamia explains that PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) is a disorder “...where the consequence of a prior situation where [a person was in] danger is re-lived in the present where the emotional memories are triggered” (2). Generally speaking, PTSD causes people to think back to a dangerous situation they were in and imagine that it is happening again in the present. Julia Butterfly Hill explains that during a PTSD attack, even though a person “...may intellectually know that [they] are safe, [their] brain automatically prepares [them] for the worst to happen—a situation that it recognizes has happened before—which speaks to the power of emotional memory” (1). Even though something may not actually be happening, people could imagine it because of extreme fear in the past.

In conclusion, fear drives action in many different ways. From instinctual responses to PTSD, fear has a place in every person’s life. While fear can cause life-saving instincts to kick in, it can also be limiting and even debilitating. People should heed FDR’s advice, respecting the powerful emotion of fear, while continuing to conquer it.