



Are Anxiety & Fear Bad Things? ^[1]

Garrett Ray Harriman ^[2]12.1K reads

When out of proportion with real threats, fear and anxiety have the power to disrupt your life and your goals. At their cores, however, these emotions exist to keep you safe and positively impact your well-being.

You've now learned some general information about anxiety and fear—their differences ^[3], their theories ^[4], and their unique interperative histories ^[5]. The elephant in the room is still unanswered:

"Are anxiety and fear bad things?"

This question can be difficult to answer; it's tempting to speak in sweeping generalities. There are instances in life when your body's fear response and your mind's anxious racing can either get you into or out of trouble. Like all emotions, even though some may make us "feel bad," the reason for their existence is deeply connected with preserving our mental and physical well-being. Anxiety and fear are no exception.

Let's take a quick look at some outright positive experiences anxiety and fear permit us to be a part of. Then you can decide for yourself if they are truly obstacles preventing your from healthy living.

Survival

As previously explored, your fear response is a primal survival mechanism. Your mind releases a swill of chemicals and neurotransmitters to many different brain centers (which we'll look at in-depth here ^[6]) which activate your "fight, flight, or freeze ^[7]" response. If the danger is immediate and has the potential to injure or kill you, your body and mind prep for whichever option is most viable and likely to aid your survival. You can thank a long evolutionary chain of choices for this protocol.

The thing to keep in mind, especially in today's "Age of Anxiety," is recognizing that this evolutionarily-perfected danger alert system is still ticking away deep within us. For millions of people, day-to-day survival no longer factors in predators or life-or-death struggles. All the same, you may continually find yourself scared, truly terrified, in modern stressful situations or be thrust into "fight, flight, or freeze" mode when facing modern problems. Money issues, keeping appointments, relationship fallout—all of these scenarios and more may be perceived by your senses and interpreted by your brain as serious threats.

In other words, your fear response is not very adept at discerning *modern threats* (the non-mortal kind) from *threats of survival* (a car accident). Depending on your arousal level and a

mix of genetic predispositions and life events, certain daily tasks may overwhelm your thoughts and feelings, precipitating an exaggerated fear response to what might be a stressful, but non-life-threatening, situation.

When people talk about fear as a "bad thing," this trigger-happy aspect of our fear system has helped form that opinion. Later in this course, we'll look at ways to alleviate and cope with your own personal fear responses and anxious thought cycles [8]. For now, rest assured that your fear response's main goal is to keep you safe. It may misinterpret its environmental and cognitive cues, causing undue duress from time to time, but fear does its job to its full extent whenever you truly need it. Fear is there for you through thick and thin.

Self-Control and Decision-Making

Fear is also a key factor in promoting a healthy sense of right and wrong and self-control. The amygdala, the brain center responsible for the fear response, also inhibits other "impulses" thanks to an evaluation of threat or risk. This flies counter to what you may believe:

"If only I didn't get afraid, I'd make great decisions all the time!"

There are times when unnecessary fear and risk assessment certainly help performance and long-term goal achievement, but without fear's initial emotional evaluation, our self-reflective cognitive processes wouldn't have a baseline of "acceptable" behavior. Fear helps keep our decision-making and self-control in check, especially where emotional content is concerned. Read up on this case study [9] for a particularly impactful example.

Interpretation is Everything

Research tells us that fear, anxiety, and stress are neither positive nor negative [10]. Instead, it is our reactions to these emotions, and the situations in which they're aroused, that seem to "pick their path" in our minds.

Dr. Kelly McGonigal of Stanford University delivered a powerful talk about [11] these findings. She cites a study of 30,000 American adults who, if they believed that stress was not harmful to them, had the lowest risk of dying compared to people who believed stress was harmful (43% of whom died). Their physical stress responses (constricted heart blood vessels) also changed for the better when they interpreted stress as challenge, not danger.

She also describes how the fear and anxiety we feel surrounding stress are more complex than mere physical reactions: Stress turns off brain centers responsible for long-term planning, which is a big reason why prolonged fear and anxiety halt progress [12]. It's also for this reason that prolonged stress and cycles of fear and anxiety can be so devastating to the body (more on that here [13]).

Overall, believing that the mental and physical reactions of stress aren't signalling a failed coping response, but instead telling you that you are physically and mentally preparing to meet a challenge head-on, has profound effects on your reactions.

So are anxiety and fear "bad?" It all depends on your outlook, your reaction to these emotions when they arise, and your ability to remember that fear and anxiety have helped humanity reach where it sits today.

Links

- [1] <https://explorable.com/e/are-anxiety-fear-bad-things>
- [2] <https://explorable.com/users/grharriman>
- [3] <https://explorable.com/2-what-is-fear-what-is-anxiety>
- [4] <https://explorable.com/theories-of-emotion>
- [5] <https://explorable.com/the-history-of-anxiety-fear>
- [6] <https://explorable.com/fear-anxiety-the-brain-physiology>
- [7] <http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Psychological+anxiety>
- [8] <https://explorable.com/coping-acceptance>
- [9] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-science-willpower/201012/why-we-need-little-fear>
- [10] <http://healthland.time.com/2011/11/23/anxiety-friend-or-foe/>
- [11] http://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend?language=en
- [12] <http://scopeblog.stanford.edu/2012/06/27/stanford-health-psychologist-kelly-mcgonigal-discusses-how-stress-shapes-us/>
- [13] <https://explorable.com/the-physical-psychological-risks-of-anxiety>