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Fear vs. Anxiety

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The fact is that public speaking is stressful. Our reactions to it may vary, but the most common one is nervousness. But is there a difference between being scared and being anxious?

Most of us people have experienced both fear and anxiety. These are quite common experiences, and we usually employ healthy mechanisms to deal with both. However, while fear is a constructive and useful emotion, anxiety may prevent us from living our lives to the fullest, and force us to dread problems of the future, which have no impact on our lives right now.

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What Is Fear?

Fear is defined as a natural reaction to imminent danger. It is a bodily reaction, that unlocks our fight or flight instinct, and is directed towards a known danger.

Fear, as well as other emotions, has its purpose - it can even save your life. While driving a car, we may not see an approaching pedestrian, and when he or she comes in our field of vision, we instantly hit the brakes to avoid an accident. Shortly after, we realize that we were afraid. The decision to stop was not rational or analytical but was more of a reaction to our fear. Having to think about it first would waste precious time, and so fear steps in, by alarming your body and ushering immediate action. Thus, fear saved the day, not our reasoning or

calculations as to which response might be the most suitable one.

What Is Anxiety?

On the other hand, anxiety is often vague, we are unable to pin down the specific reason behind anxiety, and it is usually the result of negative thoughts about the future or past, which we are not necessarily able to identify.

Sometimes, worrying is inevitable. For instance, when you are well aware that you didn't study enough for an exam, and yet it's imperative that you pass. However, anxiety is a bit different – it relates to worrying about unpleasant circumstances and dangers, which are not currently happening and may even never happen. Anxiety, unlike fear, leads to emotional strain, rather than life-saving actions.

Keeping the driving example in mind, anxiety would occur with no pedestrian in sight. Anxiety is the concern that we might cause an accident, even if there are no objective reasons to believe so.

Bears In Sight

Imagine you are walking in the woods and suddenly you see a bear. Your body will instinctively react, and you will experience fear. The danger is real, and your reaction is natural - you are afraid for your life. And that is how fear can help us deal with threats.

However, if you are afraid of being attacked by a bear, even though there are no bears in this forest, you are dealing with anxiety.

Bodily Reactions

Our bodily sensations, caused by fear or anxiety, are slightly different. When you see a bear, your heart will race, your breathing will become quick and shallow, a dose of adrenaline will be released into your body, to prepare you for either escaping the danger or fighting it.

However, if you feel if you are shaking, if your knees are weak, if you experience a pounding heart, nausea, sweaty palms, tingling sensations, pain, upset stomach, ringing ears, and - most importantly - there is no bear ("But what if it shows up suddenly?!") or a pedestrian, you are experiencing anxiety.

Fear, Anxiety, and Public Speaking

It's essential to understand that both fear and anxiety are a normal part of every human life. However, anxiety can be detrimental to your quality of life, if you let it.

In situations such as public speaking, we can experience both fear and anxiety. If you have not prepared well enough, you may be reasonably scared of making a mistake. If there is someone very significant in the audience, you may be worried what he or she will think of you.

It is worth mentioning that if you are not properly prepared, you may be inclined to imagine only scenarios in which you fail miserably. On top of that, you might underestimate your skills and preparation, as well as all the work that was put into the speech. You may, therefore, focus only on how things can end up badly. Our minds can get very creative in such circumstances:

“Oh, you will mess it up, and everyone will think you are stupid.”

“You are afraid, which means you are inadequate and weak.”

“Of course, something will ruin your speech - something always happens.”

In everyday life, fear and anxiety may be interchangeable concepts, but it is still important that you understand the difference between the two, so that you can recognize it in your life.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

This is how your anxiety and negative thoughts are creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you think you are incompetent, and you keep repeating it to yourself, you can easily start acting like you truly are. The vicious circle will keep spinning, while you are trying to fight a self-invented enemy.

Is there anything you can do? Of course, there is - you can make fear or anxiety your ally, not your opponent. And we are here to help you cross that path.

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