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A Brief History of Anxiety & Fear

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Fear and anxiety have been thought about and explained in many different ways throughout history. Our understanding of these emotions would be incomplete without a brief look back at older theories of emotions and the roles of anxiety and fear.

The last section explored the general history of emotions and current theories surrounding them. You now know that emotions are the results of both biological and cognitive processes that allow us to respond to and interpret danger in our inner- and outer-environments.

But what about the "problem" emotions fear and anxiety? How have we come to understand them specifically, and how do they aid our survival? These answers are integral to the history of emotion itself. We'll cover the highlights of how people have thought about these emotions in brief. You may even recognize some similar ideas about living a "balanced life" at work today!



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Theories of Fear and Anxiety

Fear and anxiety have long theoretical histories. Today, medical and psychological science agree that fear and anxiety are emotional states accompanied by very specific bodily sensations. But fear has fascinated many minds throughout history, and many explanations were given to rationalize fear's origin and purpose.

Ancient Greeks

The ancient Greek philosophers had many ideas and explanations [1] for the origins, mechanisms, and outcomes of fear and anxiety. Though their scientific and medical knowledge was limited, it is still fascinating to learn how inclusively they thought about fear.

Aristotle felt that fear was the opposite of confidence. To him, the world was reducible to pairs of opposites, (hot and cold, wet and dry). It was also from his school of thought that we associate great men as those who suffer through fear and anxiety. Great men and women are the ones who overcome fear's effects. The cure for fear was to act in virtuous ways, including being courageous. Much in contrast to today's mantras, Aristotle did not advocate the pursuit of "fearlessness." To be fearless was a sign of true "imbalance" of the opposite life pairs discussed earlier. It was considered crazy to not fear the gods and the all-consuming influence they had on the environment.

Aristotle believed fear worked in the body via body heat and blood. An angry person's blood, for instance, was said to radiate away from their heart and cause their angry behaviors and thoughts. Fear was the opposite: blood contracted toward the heart, making the body cold and leading to many of the physical symptoms (trembling, sweating, urinating) that very fearful people experience.

Epicurus was another great fear thinker for his time. Unlike Aristotle, he believed that it was best to avoid and predict fear, not overcome it through virtuous acts. This perspective came from his view that life was composed of tiny particles (atoms) and that the configurations of these atoms in a person's body and soul led to unbalanced irreducibles. He felt that the mind, body, and soul were all composed of these atomic sheets, which was why fearful thoughts and acts could both feel so painful. He advocated that fearful people's best chance at avoiding fear altogether was to adopt this atomic viewpoint, and thus take their fear away from the power of the gods.

Galen, another Greek thinker, also agreed with the Aristotelean idea of "balances" of opposite elements controlling thoughts and feelings. The goal of existence was to try to reach the ideal "balance" of all these elements to live a fulfilling inner and outer life. To Galen, in cases of extreme fear and anxiety, these balances were so off-kilter that some people suffered fears of imaginary things. He was also very curious about explaining the physical symptoms of fear in terms of these extreme imbalances. For instance, he felt trembling was caused by bearing too heavy of an emotional burden.

Medieval Views & the Renaissance

You've seen that the Greeks' view of medicine and mental moods were intimately connected, just as they are today. Schools of thought remained largely the same for centuries after. The mechanism from the imbalances and interactions of the elements to imbalances and interactions of atoms in the soul and body held true through the medieval period and the Renaissance.

Medieval doctors and thinkers likewise believed that a person's health and wellness was dictated by their balance and imbalance of bodily fluids [2]. This system stemmed from the Greeks, specifically Hippocrates (460-370 BCE). In many ways an extension of the irreducible elements of the Greeks, the concept of **bodily humors** dominated Medieval and parts of Renaissance thinking. The body was thought to be composed of four "humors," or fluids, that determined not only the mental and physical health of people's lives, but their entire

dispositions and personalities.

Like the Greek irreducibles, an "imbalance" of certain humors over others determined how prone you were to certain temperaments and medical conditions [3]. The four humors were black bile (*melancholic*, sad or depressed), yellow/red bile (*choleric*, easily angered or disturbed) blood (*sanguine*, optimistic and courageous), and phlegm (*phlegmatic*, calm and patient). We still use these terms today when speaking in generalities of personality and disposition!

Based on this humoric approach, fear and anxiety, and their related consequences of mood and body, were not interpreted as caused by life experiences or outside factors. You were simply fearful or anxious because that was your temperament, your specific humoric configuration. Doctors of the era prescribed changes in environment, diet, and even bloodletting to try to restore the humor balance of people afflicted with an overabundance or scarcity of a certain type.

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Links

[1] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1751166/?page=1>

[2] <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/contagion/humoraltheory.html>

[3] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humorism>