



What is Fear? What is Anxiety? ^[1]

Garrett Ray Harriman ^[2]20.9K reads

Fear is an emotion that helps protect us from immediate danger. Anxiety is an emotion that helps us imagine and prepare for future danger. Both are integral to the human experience.

Ever driven on an icy road? How about on an icy road during a particularly bad snowstorm? Your mind and body were probably hyper-focused on your body and your environment. You made sure to drive slow and were careful not to skid out. You checked your mirrors and unfogged your windows. Even if you were confident that your tires were strong enough to take on this excursion, and even if you were used to driving in this weather, fear kept you focused and alert. Every motion of your body and thought in your mind likely existed in that moment to help you survive this trip.

Now think back to a time in school when you had to present something in front of the class. Your teacher or professor probably gave you ample time and resources to prepare in advance. You were aware of the dates when all of the pieces were due, who your group members were, and estimated how long certain tasks would take to complete. This pre-planning and forethought is the domain of anxiety—to prevent future failure and the "danger" of not completing the assignment, you prioritized your tasks and set deadlines for yourself. Personality factors and life experiences may have led anxiety to take too many liberties with your attention—you may have "stressed out" to a degree out of proportion with the task at hand, catastrophizing and imagining all of the worst outcomes.

Even if these two scenarios have never directly applied to you, it's easy to relate to the feelings they evoke. The first example highlights the emotion **fear** at work. It activates in the present when your body and mind tell you that a dangerous situation is happening. It directs your attention to the most vital actions and thoughts you need to put yourself at ease and move out of harm's way.

The driver in this situation could have listened to and reacted to fear in any number of ways. She could have pulled over to the side of the road in an effort to let the storm pass or to calm herself down. Or she could have reminded herself that she was being cautious, that she had driven in worse weather before, and let her fear dissipate into a guiding force.

In the moment, **anxiety** may feel very similar to fear. It activates many of the same chemical systems and brain structures which come alive for fear. Many bodily sensations that accompany anxiety—racing heart, sweaty palms—also make an appearance with fear.

The major difference is one of time and perspective. Anxiety is always an emotional reaction

to stress, danger, or possible negative outcomes *that exist in the future*. Fear is present; anxiety is past and future.

If there is no immediate way to explain your feelings of unease, if something is unknown or out of your immediate control, anxiety is at work. You're not concerned with failing the assignment in the moment—after all, it isn't yet due—but your actions are preparing you the best they can to avoid the outcomes you imagine might happen should you fail the assignment—bad grades, failed courses, ridicule from classmates. You may even take these imagined scenarios to an extreme: "If I fail this assignment, I'll never pass this course! I'll flunk out, have to abandon school, and join the circus!"

Fear and anxiety are both integral emotions to the human experience. They act in similar and unique ways to keep our wits about us in situations where danger or failure is either a real or untested possibility. They can also be exaggerated and taken much too far. And, as we'll see, despite the uncomfortable ways they may make you think and behave, there are many beneficial aspects to healthy senses of fear and anxiety in our lives.

This section of the course gives you a brief overview of what fear and anxiety are—how these emotions likely came about in human development [3] and what purpose they serve us in the modern world. The section after this one exposes you to how anxiety and fear manifest in the brain [4] chemically, physically, and psychologically.

Remember: **Fear is about the known present; anxiety is concerned with the unknowable future.**

Examining the history and usefulness of these emotions will bring you one step closer toward understanding how they advocate for your survival and success every day. With these basics firmly in mind, learning how these emotions cause so many people long-term psychological pain will increase your sensitivity and awareness of how you react to these emotions in your own life and how you may eventually cope with them more productively in the future.

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