

Essential **key** number 2:

facing your fear

becoming fearless

Only when we are no longer afraid do we begin to live.

-Dorothy Thompson

We are taught fear at a very young age. It is a learned behaviour, so it can, if we wish, be educated out of us. Fear is a way of thinking that can hinder or help our life. What is important is to learn how to use fear to our advantage and not allow it to work against us.

I must begin by saying there is a place for fear. When fear shoots through our veins, constricting our blood flow, it puts the body in survival mode. It keeps us safe and stops us from taking unnecessary risks. **It is a primal and basic instinct, to be honoured when it is needed and discarded when it is not.**

Functional fear presents itself when you are in danger. Your house catches alight and it is fear that sends you running out the door, away from the scorching flames. This fear is a response to a real threat and keeps you careful and alert – it stops you from getting hurt. But as much as fear can stop you from getting burnt and even save your life, it can also stop you from moving forward.

When fear works against you, it can be paralysing. It can make you doubt yourself, forcing you to come up with lame excuses to avoid dealing with things that appear too scary. When you lose faith in yourself, the doubting begins and the fear moves right in.

Irrational fear often shows up as worrying, when you are afraid of something that might happen. You mull over something, without having any real proof that what you dread will actually eventuate. It could be out of your control, but you still worry.

When you experience irrational fear, consider this definition:

**FALSE
EVIDENCE
APPEARING
REAL**

Often it is the imagination that fuels fear. It is not the event itself that is frightening; it is your memories and assumptions that make it appear to be too much to handle. More times than not, when a depressed person is fearful of something it is based on false evidence. We believe it is real because our rational mind has gone to sleep and, therefore, cannot filter the misplaced anxiety. Fear is when you have not used your inflow of information to establish the facts.

When you feel fear kick in, repeat the above statement to yourself until your fear disappears. Before long, it will become automatic and, eventually, when your mind begins to realign itself, you will no longer need to repeat that phrase.

Decrease fear and self confidence grows: increase self confidence and fear decreases.

There are many types of fear: atelophobia, fear of imperfection; atychiphobia, fear of failure; gerascophobia, fear of growing old; glossophobia, fear of public speaking. The list goes on. Often our behaviour reflects a fear of rejection. Rejection pierces the heart like an arrow. **Generally people who are depressed have suffered a great deal of rejection in their lives.**

Getting rid of irrational fear can be extra hard when you are not sure what you are afraid of. You may wonder how someone can be afraid of something, but not know what it is. Let me assure you, this was the most destructive fear I dealt with during the depression I experienced in my early 20s before I developed the toolkit to overcome it.



It would begin with me feeling down. I would not know why, but if someone said something I felt was out of line I would lash out. For a healthy mind, the statement may have been legitimate, but in the state I was in I would take offence. I would bite at anything and everything, not really understanding why.

When I became aware that I was doing this I would go and sit by myself and bounce ideas around until I worked out what was really getting me down. Once I was able to

identify the real cause of my fear I could then work on solving it. My mind would then return to its pre-depressed functioning, which would stop me taking out my emotions on myself and others. As you can see, I was misplacing my fear. I was unable to pinpoint its root cause, so I would grasp any comment, thought or event I could, and try to attach my fear to it.

I would often think I had found what had sparked my fear, only to realise I still felt down and needed to go back to my brainstorming. The process of working out where your fear is coming from can be both time-consuming and frustrating, but once you uncover the cause it is like a weight being lifted from your burdened shoulders.

It is vital you keep fear-fuelled worry under control. Not only will fear make you age quicker, it will cause undue anxiety, which triggers bouts of depression. **Worrying is disabling and serves no one.** You may have a toothache and be scared about the dentist's drill; aren't we all! Or you may be worried about how much it will cost if he finds something wrong. Fear could stop you from making that appointment, until the problem gets so bad you have to go because you cannot stand the pain anymore. Because you let fear stand in your way, you end up needing a much more complicated procedure that not only hurts you physically, but also leaves a hefty dent in your wallet.

When you catch yourself worrying, try working through this process:

Identify the real issue: Find out what it is that is really getting to you.

Do a reality check: Ask yourself, 'How likely is it that what I fear will actually happen?' and 'How bad would it be if it did?'

Decide whether action is needed: Ask yourself, 'Is there something I can do to solve this problem?'

Take action to solve it: If your answer was 'yes' to the last question, do what is needed to solve the problem.

Let the worry go: You no longer need to hang onto the worry because you have either solved it or realised that it is beyond your control, so there is no benefit of carrying the worry.

We will never completely eliminate fear from our lives, but we can definitely get to the point where our fears do not stop us from daring to think new thoughts, try new things, take risks, fail, start again and be happy. When you get to this point you realise that fear simply shows up when we're about to step out of our comfort zone, and **growth can only happen when we leap out of our comfort zone.**

The more comfortable we are with the possibility of falling down, and the less worried we are of what people think of us, the more fearless we will be. Do not allow fear to get in the way of success and hold you back from your full potential. **Choose to be brave.**

Ask yourself, what would I do if I knew I could not fail? Then start taking action on your answer. Remember that whatever it is that frightens you has frightened someone before you. Fear is universal. It touches everyone, but it clearly does not stop everyone.

Take the advice of the former US President's wife Eleanor Roosevelt, who said, '*Do something every day that scares you*'. Step out of your comfort zone. The more you do it, the less fear you will feel the next time around.

CASE STUDY 3:

Anonymous, 28 years old, Northern Territory.

We go through our lives being taught to have compassion for others: to help those less fortunate, donate to charity, show kindness and understanding to fellow human beings. This is indeed a noble and worthy quest and we should certainly aim to be the best moral citizens we can be.

However, it is just as important to show compassion to ourselves – something that is not always instilled in us at the young age it should be. I believe you can't begin to show real compassion for other people until you are able to care for yourself in the same way.

Having compassion for myself has turned my life around, which had been crippled by anxiety for about a year.

I can't remember when the feelings of severe anxiety first appeared. My memory of that time is blurred, as I must have blocked a lot out. I just knew that I was overcome with anxiety in situations that had previously never troubled me. It began with a fear of being attacked in my own home. I had recently bought my first home – a ground-level unit – and had broken up with my boyfriend.

I was terrified of being alone at night. Every few hours I would wake up in a panic thinking that the noise of a car door slamming in the neighbours backyard was someone trying to break in. The simplest sounds would set me off: even the building creaking was enough for me to bound out of bed to check every door and window.

I had a deep-seated fear of being attacked, which I believe stemmed from my days as a court reporter, being privy to gruesome details of violent and unprovoked crimes, including home invasions.

But this was not my only anxiety. With a growing workload and consistent early morning phone calls from journalists, I began waking up anxious: it was as if that first feeling determined my emotion for the day. I was in a high-pressure job, which I thoroughly disliked and I was always

waking up to a problem that had to be dealt with. I stuck with the job for a long time, as I felt it was a career my friends and family expected me to have.

Most significantly, I felt my anxiety spreading to social situations. I began having feelings of panic during work meetings, and on social occasions with friends. I became consumed by feelings of fear and anxiety and could not relax in any situation.

I didn't understand these feelings and was ashamed of reacting this way to seemingly normal work and social situations. I felt miserable and had never been in such a dark place in my life. I'd lost all sense of direction and was holding a deep, dark secret inside me: 'There's something wrong with me, but I don't know what.' I would chastise myself that I was ruining my relationships and friendships with loved ones because I fell way too short of perfect. I felt worthless and pathetic. I felt so out of control that I feared falling asleep, as I was prone to sleepwalking and I was terrified of what I might do.

Reflecting on some of those tough times makes me appreciate how far I've come. The first step to recovering from my anxiety was opening up and telling the truth about how I was feeling and admitting I had problems. The first person I told was my sister and I will never forget the help she gave me. As a medical professional, she sent me information about anxiety and depression. I could not believe it: there were actually other people out there in the world who felt the same as me!

I decided to see a psychologist. My first session was hard. I shed a lot of tears, humiliated that I had got to the stage where I had had to seek professional help. But an amazing thing happened that day: I walked out of the clinic with a glimmer of hope that things would get better. It turned out to be the first day of the rest of my life.

In these sessions with my psychologist I learnt to have compassion for myself. I began to accept the flaws – and appreciate the qualities – that make me unique and to be proud of myself. I walked away with real tools to be able to deal with anxiety when it arises – which is not often now – and learnt to spend time doing things I enjoy. My boyfriend was also very supportive and I realise how lucky I am to have such an understanding partner.

Exercise was key to my recovery. I did – and continue to do – one form of strenuous exercise every day, such as dance or gym class, running or power walking. Aerobic exercise is especially good to run off those butterflies in the stomach.

Diet was very important. Anxiety often left me feeling exhausted, so eating healthy food, regular meals and drinking lots of water helped immensely. I replaced all forms of caffeine in my diet with herbal teas such as dandelion, chamomile, peppermint and lemon.

Before my anxiety began I used to enjoy hitting the town on the weekends and having fun with friends. This inevitably meant having a few drinks. I quickly learnt it was not worth waking up with a hangover the next day. Anxiety is bad enough but when combined with the effects of a big night it makes for a tough day.

I will never forget the true friendships I had during this difficult time. At the height of my anxiety I became withdrawn. I stopped inviting friends for coffee, lunches and dinners, not because I didn't want to see them but because I didn't want them to see what I had become. Yet a handful of friends stuck by me. I will never know to this day whether they truly knew how I was feeling. Maybe they did, maybe they didn't, but I appreciated the fact that they never gave up on a friend who may have appeared unwilling to hang out, but really longed for nothing more.

My best advice to sufferers of anxiety is to learn to love yourself and be realistic with the expectations you have. Everyone is unique and beautiful in his or her own way. And everyone is flawed – otherwise we would not be human. Be brave and share your problems with a friend or family member. My experience of bottling up emotions is proof that problems do not disappear if you ignore them. However, I also have proof that fears do gradually disappear when you tackle them head on, as that is what I have done.

I'm now able to attend meetings without feeling panicky and scared. I'm able to enjoy spending time with my friends again. Overall, I'm a much more relaxed and happy person.

I've developed the confidence to pursue a new career that I love. I do not pretend that I will never feel anxious again because that is not realistic. I just know how to deal with it on the rare occasion it does arise. Perhaps now, I can truly show a true sense of compassion to others.

Chapter from

[The Upside of Down: A personal journey and toolkit for overcoming depression](#)

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