

The Complexity of Fear

Are you experiencing anxiety, or is it fear?

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2011

Fear is a universal human emotion that researchers, psychologists, and philosophers have been trying to understand for ages. In this article, Dr. Mary C. Lamia reveals why fear is such a complex emotion to understand. As you read, look for evidence to answer these very important questions: What is fear? How does fear drive action?

10 As you are walking home alone late at night, you hear the soft, crackling sound of someone or something stepping on dry leaves nearby. Your heart begins to race as you imagine who or what lurks in the shadows. Are you experiencing fear, or anxiety? The differences between these emotions can be confusing. Even in psychological literature you will frequently find the concepts used interchangeably. Fears of the unknown, a fear of death, contamination fear, a fear of flying, catastrophic fear, a fear of success, and a fear of failure are all commonly noted as a "fear," yet they are actually experienced as the emotion of anxiety. Similarly, phobias are considered to be an anxiety disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), even though we think of a phobia in terms of something that is feared, be it insects, enclosed spaces, heights, or contamination. Yet fear and anxiety are important to differentiate, to the extent that one can do so. These emotions can transform into behaviors that may lead you to avoid situations or into defense mechanisms that may obscure the recognition of reality, and consequently they have been understood as keys to the dynamics of emotional illness (Ohman, 2010).

20 Fear is generally considered a reaction to something immediate that threatens your security or safety, such as being startled by someone suddenly jumping out at you from behind a bush. The emotion of fear is felt as a sense of dread, alerting you to the possibility that your physical self might be harmed, which in turn motivates you to protect yourself. Thus, the notion of "fight or flight" is considered a fear response and describes the behavior of various animals when they are threatened—either hanging around and fighting, or taking off in order to escape danger. Yet it has also been recognized that animals and people have other responses to a threat: a person or animal might play dead or just "freeze" in response to being threatened; yell or scream as a fighting response rather than get physical; or, isolate as a flight response. As a result, some researchers suggest an expanded version of the fight-or-flight response, namely, "freeze, flight, fight, or fright" (Bracha, Ralston, Matsunaga, Williams, & Bracha, 2004). Others have suggested that "tend-and-befriend" responses should also be considered, such as turning to others for help or social support, or making a situation less tense, dangerous, or uncomfortable in some way (Taylor, Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung, & Updegraff, 2000).

30 In contrast to fear, anxiety is a general state of distress that is longer lasting than fear and usually is triggered by something that is not specific, even though it produces physiological arousal, such as nervousness and apprehension (Lang et al., 2000). Yet both fear and anxiety emotions are triggered in response to threat. Some researchers distinguish between fear and anxiety by determining whether or not avoidance behaviors are present (Sylvers et al., 2011), or if the intended outcome has to do with avoidance or escape (Lang, et al., 2000). Thus, the presence of avoidance behaviors would indicate fear, in contrast to anxiety where a person may be very much on the alert but does not avoid the situation. However, this can be confusing since in certain anxiety disorders, particularly in phobias, the

focus is specific and avoidance behaviors are present. Perhaps better clarifying the difference is the notion that where anxiety is foreboding and puts you on alert to a future threat, fear immediately leads to an urge to defend yourself with escape from an impending disaster (Ohman, 2010).

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There are times when a past fear might re-emerge, even though the present situation does not truly warrant the need to be afraid. Such is the case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), where the consequence of a prior situation where you actually were in danger is re-lived in the present when those emotional memories are triggered. Although you may intellectually know that you are safe, your brain automatically prepares you for the worst to happen—a situation that it recognizes has happened before—which speaks to the power of emotional memory. A post-traumatic response can be triggered by a situation that is similar to a past trauma, the date in which a trauma occurred, a particular thought, or by a relationship that brings up an issue that is similar to a trauma that you have previously experienced. In a simple example, people who have been rear-ended in a motor vehicle accident frequently describe that, for many weeks or months, they fear being rear-ended again and, as a result, find themselves vigilantly peering into their rear view mirror in anticipation of an impact occurring. But here we are once again faced with confusion between fear and anxiety. Although a post-traumatic response may have to do with a situation in which fear was the primary emotion involved, PTSD is listed as an anxiety disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (2000). The danger is not an actual one in PTSD, but it is anticipated or expected based on a prior experience. So where the original trauma triggered fear, post-traumatic stress may trigger anxiety that anticipates fear.

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From an evolutionary perspective, the emotion of fear protected humans from predators and other threats to the survival of the species. So it is no wonder that certain dangers evoke that emotion, since fear helps protect you and is therefore adaptive, functional, and necessary. However, there is another important aspect of emotions to consider that, in the case of fear, may be important to decision-making as well as survival. That is, when an emotion is triggered it has an impact on our judgments and choices in situations (Lerner and Keltner, 2001). In a study of risk taking, participants who were fearful consistently made judgments and choices that were relatively pessimistic and amplified their perception of risk in a given situation, in contrast to happy or angry participants who were more likely to disregard risk by making relatively optimistic judgments and choices (Lerner and Keltner, 2001). Similarly, individuals who are trait fearful—those who tend to have personality characteristics that are dominated by the emotion of fear—will avoid taking risks that are generally perceived by others as relatively benign (Sylvers, et al., 2011). Thus, awareness of your emotions and considering how they might influence your decision-making in a given situation is important in your approach to life, your work, and your goals. Certainly, such is the case of fear in all of its complexity.

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