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the loudest guest

*How to change and control
your relationship with fear*

DR AMY SILVER



About the author



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She has decades (ouch!) of experience helping people to have more courage and have courageous conversations safely. She firmly believes a better world is possible if we can master the fears that stop us from being the best version of ourselves and if we can learn to tame the fears that continue to cruelly divide us from each other.

Amy's passion for helping people manage their fear was solidified in her doctorate which looked at how fear tells people what to do. She has a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, Masters in Forensic Psychiatry, Masters in Performance, Bachelor with Honours in Psychology and further therapeutic training. She has published widely in academic journals and more accessible media. She is a contributing author in many books including the acclaimed Oxford *Handbook of Behavioural Experiments* (for Oxford University Press). She is the author of the book *Conversations Create Growth*. Amy is on faculty at Thought Leaders Business School.

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*To the fear chasers
and to everyone who has ever shared
their fears with me,
thank you*

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Preface

We have the power to look deeply at our fears, and then fear cannot control us. — Thich Nhat Hanh¹

There is no reason for fear or anxiety to control us without our consent. There are answers available to us from decades of scientific research that show us how to move into a position of power over our emotions. And yet, we are still reduced by fears – fears that tell us to hide, stay quiet, avoid, stay still, stay small and fit in. We have fears that tell us to defend, attack, deny, resist, protect and fight. I am passionate about showing people how to release themselves from the grasp of fear so that they can truly reach their potential.

Fear is the operating system used by much of the world and the root of most human interpersonal pain and suffering. We have a fear of sharing – things, people, teams, resources, countries. If we could move past this fear, perhaps we could live more harmoniously. We fear difference and see it as a threat. If we mastered that, imagine what we could do, individually and together? What could we do if we were free from being manipulated by others who use fear to control us? If we each learnt how to control our own fear rather than allowing fear to control us, what would the world look like? My whole life as an adult, and possibly as a child, has been the investigation of the control of fear as a tool to enable growth, personal power and excellence at work.

In my career as a Clinical Psychologist, I studied and practised therapy with people using key emotional management theories and

therapies (person-centred, cognitive behavioural, psychodynamic). I then went on to learn further therapies such as cognitive analytic therapy, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and commitment-based therapy.

My area of speciality, built over my 13 years of practice, was helping people who experienced physical and emotional symptoms that were untreatable by medicine. This included patients with genetic conditions, physical pain, chronic fatigue, disfiguration, terminal illness and degenerative conditions. When someone experiences pain for longer than three months after the original physical injury, we call it chronic pain. While skin, bone or muscle damage may be visible through a variety of tests, pain is subjectively defined. Often there is no correlation between the amount of pain people report and the origin of the pain, nor the severity of the damage they have. Pain seems to be moderated by something else.

The key treatment of chronic pain is to ensure patients do not worsen their symptoms by inactivity. Inactivity leads to deconditioning of other muscles and can cause further injury or pain. Over time this can lead to degeneration of ability, a reduction in the activities people take part in and therefore their mood and quality of life are vulnerable. Treatment for chronic pain includes a graded exercise plan that strengthens people's muscles as well as giving confidence to keep up their activity and interest levels.

For chronic pain patients who avoid physical activities, there is a worsening of symptoms and an increase in the impact of their pain in their life. It appears that when people are afraid of movement or activity, their experience of pain is more severe and they are therefore more debilitated.² Fear is also predictive of emotional distress.³ When we are fearful of pain, or of a worsening of the pain, we will be more incapacitated regardless of the pain's origin or severity. For people who have chronic pain, pain-related fear is more disabling than the pain itself.⁴

In 1998, I started extensive research with chronic fatigue sufferers to see if fear was equally as important in understanding chronic fatigue as it had been in understanding chronic pain. From my research it appears it is. I created a statistically sound measure that can be used to evaluate the fear of exacerbating symptoms for patients diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). In a sample of CFS patients, I did a more in-depth study. I gathered information on the severity of their symptoms (physical and emotional), the origin of their symptoms, their quality of life and the length of time people had experienced symptoms. I also measured their fear of exacerbating their symptoms by asking them to test their physical endurance on a sports indoor cycle.

The research showed that as with chronic pain sufferers, for CFS patients there was an important relationship between fear and the patient's persistence on the physical activity. Essentially the findings showed that high fear led to less exertion on the exercise. In fact, fear of physical activity was more predictive of endurance than the level of disability or symptoms the patients had.⁵ One patient could have few physical symptoms and yet if they were fearful, they would persist with the task for less time than someone who had more symptoms but lower fear. This indicates that people with CFS might be choosing not to do something based on their fear.

Good management of physical exercise is one of the most successful ways to treat chronic fatigue. If people are fearful of physical exercise, they will not adhere to treatment plans. If we want to help sufferers regain their quality of life (despite their pain/fatigue), understanding how their fear contributes to their behaviour choices is essential. Very often in the treatment of chronic health there is little we can do to fix the origin but there is a lot we can do to change the patient's level of fear. Controlling fear has long been an area of specialisation.

Fear control was one of the ways I helped patients progress with their treatment plans. As a therapist, here are some of the common fears I worked with:

- In times of ill health or threat of ill health, there is a new realisation of the fragility of life and wellbeing. People who are struck by ill health or restrictions in their ability are confronted by the truth that the future is uncontrollable. This provokes much distress for some, not only in terms of their physical health but also their sense of predictability. Fear of the future can start to inhibit people by consuming their thinking and it can impact the choices people make. It may also lead to fear around the patient's sense of identity or role.
- People who are worried or fearful that movement will exacerbate their symptoms avoid movement and limit their activities (for example, staying more at home, cutting relationships or decreasing their presence at events). It doesn't take long for people to be seriously deconditioned and therefore the fear of movement needs a clear plan of action.
- For people experiencing physical symptoms such as chronic pain and fatigue, especially for those where the impact of medical treatments has plateaued, it may be difficult to live with the remaining symptoms. People become fearful that there will be a lack of a return to full health. They may also become fearful of accepting behavioural solutions rather than persisting with looking for medical solutions. This can lead to obsessive and consuming behaviours which can pull people's attention further on to the symptoms. With increased focus comes an increase in pain or fatigue perception.
- Patients can become fearful of communication with loved ones or people at work. It may feel difficult to have conversations about the future or show symptoms to others and this can lead

to withdrawal from activities. There may be fear about other people's reactions or judgements. Fear could also be centred around wanting to protect others from knowing about the pain and this can lead to sufferers pretending or putting a mask on. This can mean that others don't understand or support in ways they could and can lead to sufferers feeling fake or exhausted by the pretending. It can also lead to resentment that others don't understand. All these fears can again cause distress and lead to a further stressor for people already suffering with physical symptoms.

- For many people, the fear of death can be greatly exacerbated by physical ill-health or the increase in feeling vulnerable. The fear of death can be debilitating.

By 2004 I had been working as an academic researcher and tutor at Oxford University, UK, for three years. My career was considered successful at a relatively young age. I was now teaching other clinicians my work and training future doctorate students of Clinical Psychology.

I lived in a beautiful village in Oxfordshire, picture-postcard stuff. I had been doing amateur dramatics in a local group for a few years and it had reignited a passion of mine from childhood. I loved it. I loved how playful it was and how explorative it felt. I was also horrified at how limited my performance was by my overthinking and self-consciousness. The fear narrative in my head was strong, so strong it was painful. There were times I couldn't hear the director's instructions, hear the other actors give advice, tune in to my own thinking or remember my lines as the fear voice was so loud! I could see what I wanted to do with my body and I wanted to perform with ease and freedom but I couldn't seem to intervene with what fear wanted for me. Fear wanted me to be an observer on the side, not to make a fool of myself, to quit, to shy away from acting.

In the comfort of my own home with no audience, I could get close to what I wanted to do but in front of others, fear was in control.

Some part of fear is, of course, negative, however some of it is very positive. Fear can be an amazing motivator. It can drive us towards a challenge that will stretch us and help us grow. Fear of failure can drive us to succeed. We can put in more effort when we are fearful of failure and we can stubbornly face into our fear as if to say, 'you're not going to beat me!' I didn't want to give up acting because of my fear. I had to push past my fear and it was one of the big moments in my life that showed me the pleasure of moving through the discomfort of fear.

After several years, I applied for drama school and amazingly (!) got in. I left the career I had worked so hard to achieve and moved to London to study performance. As a 30-year-old woman surrounded by mostly 21-year-olds, I was humbled by their passion and commitment to the craft of acting. They were experienced in singing, dancing, interpretive movement, things which were incredibly uncomfortable for me. How could I get free from self-screening? My body seemed physically restricted by fear, I didn't want to take up space, my hands would get stuck to my side, my feet would get heavy and my vision would get restricted as my fear played in my mind.

I realised throughout this training that the job of an actor is not really to act as if they are in the moment, the job of an actor is to really be in the moment. It is not about putting on a character – the skilled actor is being themselves in the situation outlined by the playwright. Good acting is mostly about getting out of your own way, dropping the fear and allowing yourself to just 'be'. I love acting and those years were incredibly enjoyable, but it was painful to move those fears to the side so I could be the one playing, not my fear. I am still so impressed and grateful to actors when I see them perform with such an exposed version of themselves, with such limited self-screening – they are truly showing themselves to

us and by doing so we believe the stories they share. By getting beyond their own fear about how they are perceived, they give us their truth. As an aside, I would have to say that actors remain the most self-aware people I have ever had the fortune of working with during my different careers.

My first role in ‘office’ spaces was in 2003 when I worked as a facilitator, helping people with different thinking and communication styles have successful conversations. I was amazed to find that fear seemed so prevalent in every conversation and every avoided conversation I observed. People were worried about how they would be perceived, how they might lose control, status or identity, how they might lose connections, friendships, time or even their job if they spoke their truth or held people to account. Fear seems to be everywhere, and everywhere it inhibits our performance.

If fear gets too dominant it tells us what to do. The privilege of sharing with people their lives and their fears taught me something very clearly. With no separation between our fear and our behavioural choices, we are likely to do exactly what fear wants – avoid, defend, attack, retreat. The cycle, tools and techniques covered in this book are designed to help us to both respect our fear and control it. By changing our relationship with fear, we get to choose our behaviours based on what *we* want, not what fear wants.

I believe fear is the greatest blocker to us living our best lives. My passion is to help people move past their fears, and to see how fear creates poor decisions and divides us from each other.

There are decades of complex evidence-based research into fear and anxiety. The implications of fear on our mind, body and behaviour are continuously emerging and are presented in the hundreds of peer-reviewed clinical journals of psychology. It constantly surprises me that the knowledge of how we can help ourselves through fear seem to be trapped within the realms of academia and clinical practice. I want to change that.

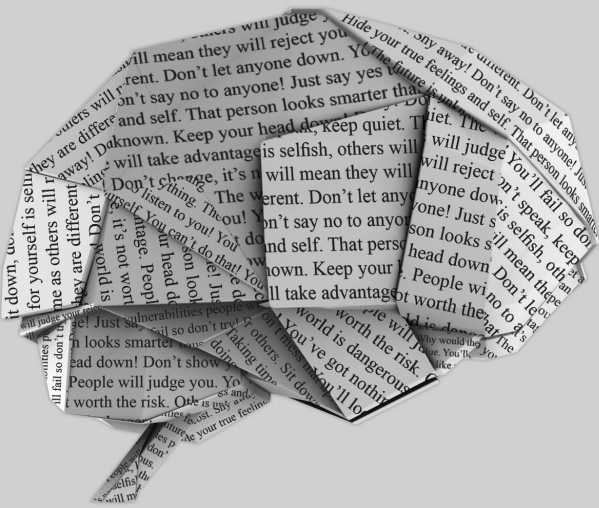
I want us all to have access to the information that can help us. The tools and techniques are not solely helpful for people who are experiencing clinically significant emotional issues or those who have a diagnosis of anxiety or depression. They are useful for all of us. ALL OF US. I continue to use these tools in my own life every time I meet a new fear. Fear is still a readily available experience for me, but over the years I have learnt not to let it control my behaviour or my choices. Over the past 17 years, I have been using emotion management to help people improve their performance outcomes at work through better communication and powerful team and individual change.

This book is designed to filter all that is known about controlling fear into a simple process that we can use to master ourselves, get more of what we want and to experience more peace within our mind.

How much do we allow fear to control us?

Chapter One

fear



Don't ever make decisions based on fear.

MICHELLE OBAMA¹

IT'S YOUR PARTY. But Fear can be heard from across the room and he draws focus from everyone. He appears to be giving loud warnings about all the things that could go wrong, all the ways in which things will fail or how we are all vulnerable. You are drawn to him as he sounds very convincing. This loudest guest is commanding the party now, telling everyone what to do.

You can no longer tune into your own thoughts, in fact, you have tunnel vision and all you can see is Fear. He speaks so loudly you can't hear yourself think, let alone decide what to do. All you can focus on is Fear, your loudest guest. Fear is dominating your brain. His constant stream of warnings is terrifying but he seems to know what to do. He wants you to listen to every word he says, do exactly as he says. He sounds convincing, he certainly has some useful ideas. He wants you to avoid risk and harm by following his instructions explicitly. If you let him control you, you will be safe.

Fear

The purpose of fear is to protect us. How much we allow that protection to reduce us is up to us.

In this book, I intend to change our relationship with fear. I will show how fear helps us and how it hinders us. Fear is designed to limit our risk, but sometimes it limits our impact in the world or our enjoyment of it. It sends us messages of total or partial avoidance. Avoidance may be useful on occasion, but the most successful people learn how to overcome the desire to avoid. Fear can also send us messages of attack and defence, telling us to protect our position, our status, our rights. Again, useful, but not always. I know if we use the lessons in this book it will help us get more of what we want. This book is for those of us who:

- feel that more courage would be good for us or those around us
- find ourselves feeling irritable, frustrated
- find that others describe or experience us as snappy, dismissive, aggressive, defensive (anger-related feelings)
- feel limited by others or circumstances
- are prone to anxiety or anxious thoughts
- are prone to worrying, ruminating, being overly concerned with something or feeling hesitant, embarrassed, scared (fear-related feelings)
- desire to do something new but worry we couldn't, shouldn't or that we would fail
- talk ourselves down either out loud or in our head
- aspire for things our fear inhibits us from seeking

- feel that there must be more to life, but we seem to get in our own way from really ‘letting go’ into our life
- are too ‘in our head’, full of doubt, regret or indecision about what the ‘right’ thing to do is
- spend too much time thinking about what people think of us
- want to explore how much fear is controlling our choices in life
- feel pressure to succeed or achieve, need approval or create unrelenting standards
- would like to say more about what we are feeling to create deeper trust or connection
- would like to give people better feedback so they can grow
- have a fear of missing out (FOMO) that drives us towards taking more on or feel sad if we are not included or able to partake
- have perfectionist tendencies
- would like to be more creative or innovative in our thinking, doing, making
- would like to do something but it seems too scary
- experience intimidation
- notice others doing challenging things with more ease than we do and wonder how they do it
- wonder what life would be like if we were able to stand up, speak up and show up more in our world
- need to break free from something or someone but don’t have the courage
- self-sabotage our success because we may feel unworthy or likely to fail anyway
- have the habit of saying yes when we mean no (or the other way round!)

- don't feel noticed
- want to teach those around us how to live their best life unlimited by self
- don't feel it is easy to put ourselves first
- want to feel in control of our emotions rather than them controlling us
- want to lead ourselves courageously
- want to lead others courageously
- have had enough of fear controlling the world.

To me it often feels as if fear traps us in a really confined space. We are fearful of being noticed and fearful of not being noticed; we are fearful of change and fearful of not growing; we are frightened of dying and frightened of living.

Good things happen when we can use fear rather than fear controlling us. We have courageous conversations, we choose things to do because they make sense rather than because they keep us the same. We can create amazing things when we can override fear. Emmy and BAFTA award winner Phoebe Waller-Bridge, creator of *Fleabag* and *Killing Eve*, has a personal mantra that she finds helps her excel – ‘write like you are not afraid of anything.’² We can serve ourselves and we can serve others better when we are not inhibited by our fear. We can be more powerful and live a bigger life. We will have relationships we deserve, careers that matter and fulfil our desires and our capability. We can drive change flexibly, with agility, not driven by fear of the ‘new’ or fear of failure.

From years of helping people communicate with more courage, build deeper trust and connection and achieve higher levels of performance, I know fear is the main way we inhibit our success. I am obsessed with showing people how to move to a position where they can move beyond fear's control and into their full potential. I don't

pretend it is an easy game to embark on, but it is an addictive one to play and one that if we take on will mean we get more out of life.

We will have reactions to our environment that seem automatic. Knowing how to manage our reactions helps us gain control. If we practise the steps set out through this book, we will learn how to *use* our fear to give us important information but not be beholden to its commands.

Fear, anxiety, worry and stress could all be defined as separate states. This book focuses on fear, and fear is a powerful presence in all those states. I would suggest you use this book to understand where fear is present for you and how it impacts your anxiety, worry and stress, if you identify with these other descriptors.

If any part of the contents of this book or the exercises causes you to realise you may need extra support, please seek support from a GP, who will recommend the next steps. There are also many services that are available to support people with their emotional needs (for example, Lifeline, Beyond Blue). Think of it like having a bouncer at the party – if some of our guests are really out of control, we need to bring in the specialists.

Thank goodness for fear!

There is nothing wrong with fear in itself – thank goodness we have it. It helps us spring into action when under threat or when we perceive a threat. It helps us judge the risks we are facing right now and the risks we may encounter in the future.

If we can use fear appropriately, it can be an incredible guide to us, a guide to betterment.

Fear serves a pretty amazing function for us. Fear's job is to tell us all the ways we could risk our safety – being physically hurt, socially rejected or exposing ourselves to unknown territory. Pretty

essential to us living successfully. This can help us to slow down, to look before jumping. It can help us moderate insatiable wants or impatience. Its very presence can help us spot mistakes we could make if we moved too fast.

In addition, certain fears like the fear of failure can be major motivators. They can drive us and others to reach further.

Fear often appeals to us – we may actually do something because it is scary or a thrill! Think about:

- scary films or rollercoasters. I am not a massive fan of either of these, but whole industries are built on the positive experiences of fear, so many must enjoy it!
- the sense of achievement we get after we push past fear. For example, that moment before we jump or that paralysing fear that we overcame. What a rush of joy we get from those same symptoms after we jump! Perhaps it's the sense of excitement we feel when we are in love and realise how vulnerable we are becoming.
- the kick we get that drives us to push ourselves against our fear, give more, work harder and push ourselves to our limit – this can make us feel alive.
- the sense of relief we feel when we find that the narrative fear had was wrong, that the bad thing didn't happen.

Think about what life would be like if we never felt fear. If we didn't feel that spike of fear, life would be pretty boring. Imagine you have a choice to let go of fear. However, if you give it up, you also have to give away a sense of challenge, excitement, satisfaction, motivation, achievement and ambition, as well as that lovely sense of butterflies in your tummy. Would you do it? Fear is necessary for us to have a whole range of positive experiences. Would you give those up just to avoid feeling frightened? Or would you rather learn how to cope

with being frightened, learn how to tolerate fear? We want it all, don't we! We want to be fearless *and* we want to strive and feel the rewards of that striving. Let's imagine for a moment, a world without fear – we would be stagnant, avoidant, most likely depressed, alone and unfulfilled.

What is fear?

The fear system is a complex biological system.

Fear in the body

When we sense fear, a complicated and sophisticated circuit called the sympathetic nervous system is triggered. The automatic system of fear gives us many symptoms, some that we see or feel and some that are unconscious or not noticed. Our own pattern or profile of fear – what we experience physically when we feel fear – will be explored further in chapter 2. While there may be some idiosyncrasies regarding how and when it gets triggered, the biological system of fear is the same for all of us.

A small almond-shaped area deep in the brain (the amygdala) is alerted and sends a message to another structure of the brain, the hypothalamus. A set of hormonal glands secrete hormones, including cortisol, into the blood. This raises blood pressure, blood sugar and white blood cells, creating energy for the muscles should they need it. Other hormones prepare muscles for sudden movement and violent action – even the base of hairs contract, causing goosebumps. The hormones drive the heart to race and breathing to speed up and slow activity in areas not immediately needed, such as the stomach, intestines, tears and saliva. Our pupils dilate, reducing our range of vision, and our hearing diminishes.

There are huge cognitive impairments that occur when our fear system is activated. The system actively switches off the cerebral (clever) part of our brain, which houses most of our uniquely human

cognitive powers, reducing its capability. Instead, it favours the parts of us that are essential to keeping us safe by running or fighting, sending energy towards the extremities of our body, our limbs, our hands and feet. We cannot create when we are in fear, we cannot make thoughtful or strategic decisions, we cannot plan or focus, we cannot follow directions well, we cannot control ourselves, we struggle with memory and recall and we may even lose our ability to talk.

This extraordinary system saves our life. It enables us to prepare ourselves to fight, flee or even to play dead. It is not an overstatement to say that this system is an evolutionary essential.

Measuring fear is interesting. It is impossible to use the trigger to predict the fear response. For example, one person will be as scared facing a mouse as another person would be facing a tiger. It is not the trigger of the fear which helps us understand our reaction. Our physical experience of fear is remarkably similar regardless of the trigger. Therefore, it is pointless to compare our fear to others. If we are scared of public speaking and compare ourselves to someone who isn't, we may feel impressed by their bravery. However, it may not be something that scares them. It may be that showing vulnerability or being physically high up are experiences that scare them.

Fear behaviours

The physical fear response outlined above is often experienced with a level of discomfort. It makes sense that one of the behaviours fear wants is to pull back from the feared event/person/thing/opportunity.

We avoid the thing we fear, thereby helping us get a sense that we have protected ourselves.

So we may, for example, avoid certain people, certain types of relationships, conversations, places, activities, experiences or tasks. We may avoid new things or new people, different ways of thinking or

being; we may avoid any sort of change at all if it triggers our fear response. We avoid opportunities for stretch or growth, preferring to stay 'safe' in the known. We make choices to appease our fear.

Fear, in fact, is the main reason we don't want to change. We fear the unknown or the risk of failure – we doubt we will be able to excel or even cope in a new situation. Even when stuck in a bad place, fear will recommend staying rather than going. It will recommend saying no rather than yes. It will tell us it's better to keep our head down and stay in the known rather than risk showing more of ourselves to others by doing something different. It puts an enormous amount of energy into resisting change.

Working as a therapist, I noticed that people often made choices that kept them in the very situation causing their pain. For example, addicts stayed using substances and surrounded themselves with those who made it hard to stop using. People who were suffering in abusive relationships stayed in abusive relationships. In essence, we find ourselves restricted by our fear rather than risking the potential of things being better.

On a micro level, we avoid difficult conversations in favour of sweeping things under the carpet, we avoid telling people our real feelings in favour of pretending we don't care, we avoid exciting roles at work in favour of roles we know we can do, we don't speak up in meetings or in social situations.

On a macro level, it is potentially why, as a society, we are not able to 'fix' systemic racism or abuse, why we allow our children to access social media even though we know it is dangerous for their wellbeing, why systems of control and dominance are still operating throughout our society, and why women are likely to be killed by a man they know. We avoid fighting for what is 'right' because we fear retribution or rejection from others, we fear standing out or standing up, we fear the impact on our other priorities.

At its root, all wars, murders, social disadvantages and the misattribution of food, energy, water and medical support exist because globally we have been led by the fear that surrounds ownership, greed and power.

Avoidance is a key strategy for many of us when we experience fear. Playing small is one of the things that fear tells us to do. We stick to a set of choices that help us avoid the discomfort of our fear voice getting louder. We avoid micro and macro issues because it's easier. We bury our head in the sand. In order to progress our own lives or the lives of others, a way of managing our fear individually and collectively is necessary. Even in our workplaces, the presence of fear is enormous. The cost to our society, businesses and our economy is incalculably immense.

Getting to know our fear

I've provided reflection questions to help us ponder and open up to explore our relationship with fear. Let's give ourselves permission to spend time with these questions, really try to sit with them. The more we focus on the questions, the more we will get from them.

There are no rules to these questions. Spend an hour thinking about one question, as some questions may require pondering deeply. Alternatively, other questions may need less time. They are designed to be appropriate to return to when we want to understand something new. Questions that don't seem relevant when we first answer them may become relevant later in our quest to take on fear. We are trying to learn more about the relationship and control our fear has and if we can learn to use it differently.

My hope is that we give ourselves the gift of time, so grab a notebook ready to write. Find a dedicated notebook to keep all thinking together, or just use scrap paper ready to go in the bin when finished writing. It doesn't matter how we approach writing, but there

are huge benefits to doing so. There is a certain beauty that happens when we pick up a pen and paper. We could write the questions posed in the chapters and our answers to keep track of our thinking and our progress. Even though it may be tempting to think about the questions in our head instead of writing our responses, the act of writing is a tangible process to help us see patterns. Writing also gives us the opportunity to separate what we think from what our fear thinks. We are not writing for anyone else to read, so it does not matter how coherent it is as we start to write – whether we use complete sentences or dot points, whether we have conflicting ideas or clear ones. The next chapter has more details about the importance of writing our responses.

The reflection questions in this book and your commitment to writing your thoughts will turn your use of this book from consumption to action.

Reflection questions: Fear and you

What does fear mean to you?

What is your most common behavioural response to fear? In other words, what do you do when you feel fearful?

When or where do you feel fearful? Are there any specific scenarios you can name?

Are there any people (specific or stereotypes) who trigger a fear response in you?

How much does fear prevent you from making changes? Or from being in changing or uncertain situations?

What else triggers your fear?

How do you manage fear? What do you do to help yourself when you are fearful? For example, avoid eye contact, close relationships, difficult conversations, speaking first, asking for help.

Where can you see your capability or outcomes are limited by fear?

Can you see where fear helps you? What strengths does it give you?

Can you see where other people's (name different individuals you know) fear helps or hinders them? What patterns can you see?

What do you think about fear as an emotion?

Fear's relationship with you

What holds you back is not fear, but your attitude towards it. The tighter you hold on to the attitude that fear is something 'bad' and you can't do the things you want until it goes away, the more stuck you will be. — Russ Harris³

When we learn how to manage fear we can expand. We, as individuals and as collectives, maximise not only our achievements and our performance but also our happiness. There is a strange but popular aspiration to be fearless. We look towards people who do amazing things and assume they experienced no fear. This book is not a positive thinking, motivational solution to avoid fear. I do not want us to avoid fear. I want us to change our relationship with fear and move it from fiercely controlling us to merely commentating.

Fear as a controller

When fear is super loud it controls us and engulfs our mind with its messages. We become fearful, literally full of fears. There is nothing else in our heads except the fear, and there is no separation between what fear wants us to do and what we want to do. It controls us with its powerful voice, and we listen to every call of danger it gives us.

Physically, we experience the symptoms outlined earlier, either severely or chronically, and this can interfere with physical well-being, sleep, focus, weight and our sense of control.

These physical symptoms of fear can be overwhelming. It takes our control away and we are overwhelmed by the physical response. Our emotions can spill out when we least want them to, with damaging impact.

When we are controlled by fear, other emotions are given greater access to us. We become likely to experience resentment, shame,

guilt, anger and many other difficult emotions. More on this will be explored in chapter 3.

An amazing thing happens when we are dominated by fear.

The symptoms of fear themselves become the thing we fear.

We may try to numb the experience of fear by using alcohol, pushing people away, using substances or medication (prescribed or unprescribed) or any form of extreme avoidance. These behaviours have the potential of being damaging.

Some people don't experience any of the noticeable anxiety feelings because they are so truly avoidant of the things that their fear warns against. If we let fear dominate all our choices, it will no doubt tell us to avoid the risk of being hurt and this can sometimes mean we avoid the pleasures of life. If we don't have it, it can't be taken away from us, right? In this case, we may experience 'down' symptoms of being detached from excitement or fun, such as boredom, cynicism, loneliness, anxiety about the judgement of others or just general flatness.

When we are controlled by fear we start to hate our fear feelings or our other feelings – we blame them, maybe even become ashamed of them. When we feel like that about fear we block it, deny it, hate it. This can lead to an extra layer of secondary feelings that add to self-criticism.

Fear as a director

Over several years as an aspiring actor I learnt the value of a director in guiding, suggesting, inspiring and opening me up to new ways of thinking. However, when directors get too instructional, too micro, too over-involved in feeding the actor lines, they can reduce the actor's performance. (This style of directing probably

gives you an indication of my acting skills or the level of acting I was involved in!) The actor starts to double-think their choices on how to play the character, the internal voices become louder and the actor struggles to choose what to do. The director has the opportunity to help, but if they too heavily direct, they remove the actor from their instincts, get them more ‘in their head’. The result is that the audience sees a more restricted, less ‘free’ performance and it makes the whole thing less believable and less enjoyable to watch.

When fear directs us it can be helpful, opening us up to see opportunity to excel or showing us risks to be avoided. However, when fear directs us loudly it may cause us to double-think ourselves, ruminate over potential outcomes and pull us back to a more reduced version of ourselves, as it tells us to stick to the script, do the things we know we can, do the predictable.

When being directed by fear we struggle to know what is fear and what is our own choice. We can't see whether fear is helpful or unhelpful. The internal struggle means we distance ourselves from our instinct or our moments of choice and go into overthinking. Others can see this internal struggle or external doubt. When being directed by fear we often resign ourselves to what fear wants and tell ourselves we are no match for fear. We often place comfort over challenge.

Fear as an advisor

We move further into control when we can see our fear as a resident advisor. Fear can be of enormous value and has the potential to advise us. If however, we run all our decisions through this advisor, we hand over our power. It can become like an overzealous ‘jobs-worth’, overshadowing our every move, taking notes on our failures and keeping records we don't need to find easily when we next approach a risk. Rather than sitting in the background, fear

can be front and centre muttering away and giving us its thoughts, making recommendations, judgements, pointing out risks and failures. It takes its job very seriously and makes us approach our life and everything in it with more caution than necessary.

When we put the fear advisor between ourselves and others, it acts as a screen. This screen can protect us (as we listen to fear) but left unchecked, the screen can become more permanent, like a wall. This wall is often visible to others and can be difficult for us to dismantle. Our worry is that once the wall is down, people will see all the fears previously hidden – this is commonly called imposter syndrome. Having fear advise us all the time can start to eat away at our self-belief and lead to a lack of confident decision-making.

Fear as a commentator

The least powerful role for our fear is that of the commentator. When fear commentates rather than dominates, directs or advises, we have the power to turn towards it or away from it depending on what *we* decide would be helpful. With this sort of a relationship, we can tune into fear's messages (either to give us motivation or to avoid harm) but not get so overwhelmed by them that we forget our goals. We make the decision when to listen to their warnings and we are also free to override these warnings. We are not beholden to our fear voice.

The ideal scenario is that we are not beholden to any single emotion; we can direct our attention around all the emotions in our mind so we can call on whichever would be most helpful to us to achieve our goal. Sometimes that might be fear, sometimes it will be hope, anger, joy or pride. Having all our emotions equally commentating in the background means they are available should we wish to focus our attention on their perspective.

We don't want fear to leave us. We want to be able to tune into it and hear what it is thinking, should we need it. We also want to control the volume button, turning the volume up or down according to our own needs. We want to be in control.

This book outlines the stages necessary to master our fear. Creating a valued and respected partnership with our fear is essential for us to learn how to listen to it. We want to be able to hear its warnings but not be limited by its commands.

Steph's Courage Club story

As a GM in a powerful global tech company, I was being considered for an executive role. Although this would be a great achievement and opportunity, I doubted myself and my capabilities. I felt flattered but thought I was a long way off being ready. My fear voice was telling me:

- flee - I can't take on that much responsibility, I don't want to mess up, I'm not sure I can do it, people's opinions of me would change and not necessarily in a good way, I don't want to compete with others for this, it's not for me, I don't even know if I want it
- fight - the current leaders do not understand what this company needs, they should be careful what they wish for if they want me, they never pick people like me
- freeze - I'll just sit it out and see what happens, I might have reached my maximum level in the company.

However, there was a faint voice telling me:

- I want it, it's so exciting, it's an opportunity to make a real change to the way the organisation is run, I love being a role model for others, I am what the company needs, it's everything I want, I'm passionate about this company and what it can do.

With some coaching, I noticed I was being controlled by my fears. My fears were telling me what to do! They were not only dominating my mind and my language but also controlling my actions. I had been offered the chance of being mentored by another executive a few months earlier but I didn't want to expose my thoughts and feelings or my lack of capability to him. I said no, because fear had told me to. I was worried about his opinion of me getting worse if I gave him more opportunity to get to know me. In retrospect, listening to fear on that one meant I missed out on learning and positioning.

As the work I did on fear progressed, I started to take opportunities to increase my 'brand' within the organisation, such as presenting my work to the executives. As I took more risks, I became less concerned with what people would think of me. I spent less time wondering how I wasn't 'x' enough or was too much 'y'.

Now, I can tolerate my fear more, I recognise it earlier, it controls me less. My fear voice (a female voice in my mind) is still triggered and when it arrives I have a mantra, 'Oh there she goes again, ranting away.'

Control our fear

Our best self is often beyond fear. The simple six-step cycle presented in this book will help us move into a position where we can change our relationship with fear so that we are in control.

There is no cure for fear, and we don't want there to be. We should not strive for fearlessness. Fear will always be part of our life. Chase fear, not the illusion of fearlessness.

The focus of our fear will shift as we progress. The more we chase our current fears, the more we will empower ourselves to chase the fears that are yet to be imagined. Let us deal with the fears we have now so that our future contains even greater challenges that enable

our continued growth. If we move past a specific fear, we gain the clarity of confidence and see a new horizon for our potential.

The presence of fear is exciting if we are in control.

If we are out of control with fear, it is scary and damaging.

To ensure fear does not have the power to turn us away from our goals, we must learn how to soothe fear, quieten its voice so it no longer dominates our mind. We want to control fear, not let fear control us. *We* want to have the power to decide what to do and when, how to gain our best results, how to live our best lives.

Figure 1 shows the cycle we will learn chapter by chapter. It is a cycle, it never ends. We are embarking on a journey that I very much hope we will use for the rest of our lives.

- **Recognition:** We must recognise where we are now, how fear aids us, interrupts us and reduces us
- **Self-compassion:** If we can learn to approach both ourselves and our fear with compassion, we become friends with our emotions rather than battling with them
- **Separation:** By separating ourselves from the messages of fear, the fears of the past or the fears of the future, we can create the space we need between what fear wants us to do and what we actually do
- **Evaluation:** From a separated position we can truly evaluate the usefulness of the warnings of fear
- **Decision:** We can then decide on a course of action dependent on our goals, not what fear wants
- **Experimentation:** By making tiny shifts in our behaviour we can move towards our goals and gain more accurate information on the value of our fear.

Are you ready to change and control our relationship with fear?

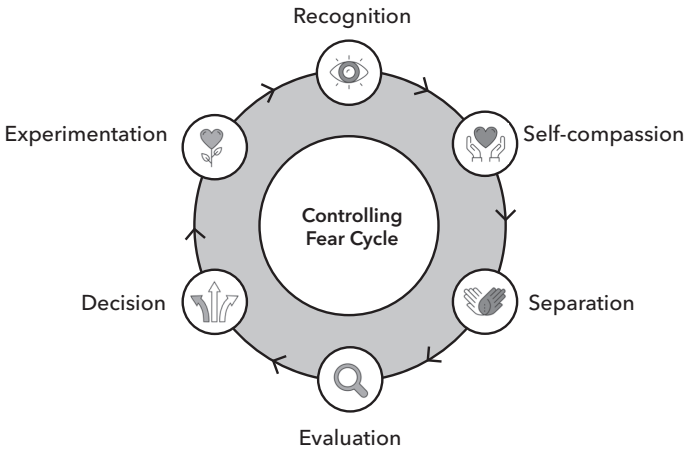


Figure 1: Controlling fear cycle

When fear looms as the loudest guest in our mind, it dominates our thoughts and controls our choices. As we work through this book we will learn how to use the cycle to change our relationship with fear. By moving fear from the place of controller towards commentator, we will start to see it as a welcome guest, crucial in helping us create our best lives. Not only will we be able to use fear for fun, motivation and safety, but we will learn how to calm it so we can take back control.

We welcome fear, but it cannot be our loudest guest.

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

Fear has the potential to be a thunderous voice in our heads – the loudest guest in the party of our life. It has some disturbing physical and cognitive symptoms and can exert dominating behavioural control. Changing our relationship with our fear from it being the controller to it being the commentator is essential if we are to be the best version of ourselves as individuals and in groups. It is time for the lessons of academic and clinical psychology to be in all our hands so we can learn the way to listen to fear. We want to use fear's wisdom but move to a position where we control it rather than fear controlling us.