

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

PERSONAL COUNSELING CENTER

Fear Not

Greetings Everyone,

I hope you and your families are doing well both mentally and physically. As this continues to drag on, Michigan seems to be doubling down on the punishment and making it cold and grey out. I wonder what April snowstorms are supposed to bring? I swear it feels like it has snowed more this spring than it did all winter....rude Michigan, rude. I hope the self-care and routines are working for you. Hopefully some of you have already started to notice the progress on the goals you have made for yourself. I am proud of the work I have been doing on my goal (5 newsletters in a row!).

This week I wanted to talk about fear and ways to conquer, overcome, and persist through fear. I will be focusing more on fears rather than clinical anxiety this week even though the two are obviously quite similar. First let's summarize the brain stuff when we are afraid. We all have what is called a Limbic System. An easy way to think about this system is an alarm system. When we are feeling afraid and/or anxious our Limbic System is activated. The primary brain structure that regulates fear is called the Amygdala. When we are exposed to a source of fear, let's say...clowns (terrifying) our Amygdala makes the decision that we are in danger and causes different hormones to increase in our body. Like a fire alarm going off when there is a kitchen fire. The primary chemicals that we all feel and can relate to are Adrenalin and Cortisol (the stress hormone). The purpose of these chemicals is to communicate that we are in danger and we need to be prepared to respond to survive. For people who struggle with Generalized Anxiety Disorder your Limbic system is firing more often and at times when it probably shouldn't. For example, if you feel a fear response when you need to make a phone call, that is likely more of an anxiety symptom. Chances are the phone isn't going to try and murder you. For our conversation today I wanted to focus more on tangible logically based fears ie, our current global pandemic.

If you take nothing else from the newsletter this week I want you to hear this: If you are feeling afraid, **that is normal**. I know for example that I feel fear when having to prepare to go grocery shopping. All of the "what ifs" run through my head, I have a hard time sitting still and difficulty concentrating. This is what I would identify as a mild fear response. My brain senses danger. Maybe some of you aren't feeling fear around catching the Corona Virus but you are scared for what it could mean for you financially. According to NPR as of yesterday, over 26 million jobs have been lost in just 5 weeks. Financial instability is incredibly scary as well as potential implications for losing your employment such as losing health insurance. It might not be your job, maybe you are scared for your

parents or friends. If you find yourself fixating on this specific theme of fear show yourself some compassion, it is objectively scary.

A clinical approach used in treating fears (typically phobias) is through exposure therapy. I will work with a client to build relaxation and grounding skills. We then gradually start to expose my client to their fear stimuli. Afraid of spiders? First I will have you think about a spider, then have you envision seeing a spider in the room, then introduce a picture of spider and then eventually I am bringing in one of the hairy 8 legged monsters into the office. The idea is to activate your Limbic system and then train your physiological response to relax as you are increasingly exposed to the stimuli. However, there are unique problems with doing exposure therapy with COVID-19. You can't see it for one, and it is against my ethics (and probably the law) for me to ask you to expose yourself to a potentially deadly virus. I also can't think of an effective way to expose yourself to potential financial insecurity. The primary challenge with being fearful of a global pandemic is that it is chronic and pervasive, you can't easily escape it. With a snake, you can run away. Out of sight, out of mind. Your fear will reduce. You can't use those same types of strategies with a viral outbreak. So then how do you conquer this fear?

There are a couple of strategies that may be helpful for you when dealing with fear like this. The first concept comes out of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT). A major component of this theory is called "radical acceptance". The basic idea is that you can't control or change anything right now (in this exact moment) so rather than worrying/fixating/or breaking down because of it, just accept that this is reality, even if it is uncomfortable. Allow yourself to be present with your emotions and process through them. Potentially utilize some good breathing exercises to help ground yourself in the moment. If you need to talk with someone (maybe even a therapist) do so! Try to work through the emotions as you sit with them.

Cultivate curiosity about your fear. Try to increase your insight as to why it is you are feeling afraid. For something like COVID-19 you may find that part of your fear is connected to not feeling in control. When we feel in control we feel safe. When we are out of control we feel insecure. If you find this is the case, then ask yourself what aspects of myself can I control that may relate to this fear? You can control how often you go out. You can control how safe you are if you go out such as wearing a mask or not. If your fear is financially based, you can control creating a budget and trying to save money where you can. Try to be fully present when engaging in behaviors that help you feel in control and see how that may help reduce some of your fear.

Seek a vacation from your fear. One of the more challenging aspects of the fear created by the Corona outbreak as I mentioned is that it is pervasive. You can't hardly go on the internet, turn on the TV, or talk with literally anyone without the topic coming up. Be intentional with self-care. Seek and engage in things that help you to temporarily forget or ignore what is going on in the world. An engaging book, crafting project, immersive video game, or an intense game of Cards Against Humanity. Give yourself permission to not always have to be consuming information about current events. Find ways to disconnect from those sources of fear. Continuously redirect your focus onto something that makes you laugh, relax, and feel content. This approach will not make your fear go away, but it will allow you to

mentally recharge so that when you have to face your fear again, you will have the energy you need to push on.

Unfortunately this specific fear will not go away. We are likely to be impacted emotionally, financially, and maybe physically by this outbreak for the coming months (I hope I am wrong). Make your goal to manage this fear, not eliminate it. Be intentional in finding ways you can thrive. There is no better time to flex your self-care muscles than right now.

Couple of sources used for this week. NPR has done a good job at covering the economic impact as well as the health impact [HERE](#). A longer article on Radical Acceptance from Psychology Today that I encourage you all to check out [HERE](#). A good Youtube video "[5 Tricks for Overcoming Fear](#)". An interesting TedTalk about reprogramming your brain around fear [HERE](#). NPR's Hidden Brain did a "science of fear" podcast if that is more your style [Click Me](#).

Your homework this week is to evaluate your fear and how it is impacting you. What kinds of things are you afraid of right now? Why are you fearful of those things? How does that fear impact you? Your performance? Your mental health? I would love to hear what kinds of things you come up with and how you plan to better manage your fear.

Take Care of Yourselves and Wash Your Hands,

Andy