

Constructive Emotions: Why Anger and Fear Are Your Friends

by Joshua Freedman

Listening to the news for an hour is enough to stir fear in anyone. Like a clammy fog, the fear seems to constrict your heart and drain your energy.

It feels bad – so it must be bad, right?

While fear and other unpleasant emotions certainly can be debilitating, these emotions are not bad for you, they are not destructive, and they are not negative. Rather, they are a source of vital information and protection.

Fear's Warning

When you touch a hot stove, it hurts. It's your body's way of saying, "**Hey!** Don't touch that!!!" So while it hurts, is that sensitivity negative or bad? It does not feel good to be burned, so we learn to avoid the hot stove. In the same way, fear is a message to help us avoid danger.

At its essence, fear is a message of uncertainty. It is a warning that there is a potential risk. The risk may be obvious (as in the fear of heights), or it may be more veiled (as in the fear of having a child). Sometimes people make this distinction between clear and generalized fears as "rational fear" and "irrational fear;" since fear is inherently non-rational, that may be a misleading differentiation. Rather, it is useful to see that there are fears we understand, and fears we don't.

To understand fear, we need to know what uncertainty is causing the fear. At the top of a high ski slope, the fear is usually clear. "I am not certain I will live to get to the bottom of this hill." The resolution of the fear is actually simple: Commit. Point your skis down the fall line, and go. Once you commit, the fear goes away because the uncertainty is gone.

Unfortunately, many of us sit at the top of the ski slope debating, "Can I?" We start blaming, wishing we were somewhere else, exhibiting negative behaviors – all in an effort to challenge the commitment. Our fear is saying, "Do you REALLY mean to do this?"

In the midst of the uncertainty, it is easy to become distracted from the real question; your fear brings in all kinds of other questions, doubts, and past experiences. Perhaps you remain engaged in inner debate; you focus on "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" on blame, and on past failures. Fear actually increases as your uncertainty increases, and soon you are paralyzed – but more about that later. Alternately, you remember the essential question: ***Do you really mean to ski this hill?*** Say "Yes!" and mean it, the fear quiets, and away you go.

You're about to give major public speech, and fear courses through you. You might be embarrassed, you might die of shame, you might become the target of ridicule, you might fail, you might succeed to far. Again, the fear is

asking, "Do you really mean it? Are you committed?" If you equivocate or avoid the question, the fear will remain a powerfully driving force – it will increase.

In one of the ironies of "helpful fear," by remaining in the thick of the emotion, your capacity to succeed will diminish. Stuck in the "unaddressed fear" you will have less clarity, less energy, and less success in your speech. The fear will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

On the other hand, if you answer fear's question, it will help you. By answering fear's question, you see why this presentation is so important. You connect with your deeply held values and vision, you embrace the audience's real need to hear the message, and your power and efficacy is increased.

Anger Kills?

Anger also has a bad rap. I know that I've done stupid things when angry, so it is easy to see anger as destructive and negative. Again, an hour of watching the news is enough to convince even the most emotion-friendly person that anger is at the root of all kinds of troubles.

Or is it?

Like fear, anger serves a useful purpose. Fear asks, "Are you sure?" Anger asks, "**Will you take action?**" Think of all the people who were angry about civil rights. About taxation without representation. About the tyranny of monarchies. Or, in more mundane angers, how about feeling so frustrated with those too-tight pants that you

finally started exercising? Or anger about tar-stained teeth you finally quit smoking? Even anger about being told "you can't" that led you to prove you can?

Anger means "there is something I don't like about the situation," or, "my way was blocked." As with fear, the challenge is to identify that "something." Once we listen to the message, the feeling diminishes, and we have a clear course of action.

Unfortunately, like fear, anger feeds on itself when you are not clear. The generalized sense of frustration leads us to see more and more that frustrates us, and anger builds because the essential discomfort remains. Like a tiny thorn that leads to a terrible wound, the minor irritation escalates from neglect.

Everything In Moderation

These positive emotions become dangerous when they escalate. Anger escalates to rage, fear escalates to terror. Both trigger the same kind of "fight, freeze, or flight" reaction – a core survival mechanism. In that crisis reaction, we **don't care** about the long-term. We forget about consequences and do anything to survive. We'll "hit back first" to destroy the risk, we'll become immobilized to hide from the risk, or we'll run to avoid it.

Yet even these extreme reactions are examples of the intelligence of our emotions. They are interpreting a situation and creating a conclusion working to keep us alive. The problem is that for most of us, *this intelligence is not trained well*, and in such challenging

moments our strong emotions lead us to unproductive, dangerous, and even destructive actions.

So how does something so positive turn dangerous? Imagine these emotions are like an ignored child: Yesterday I watched my daughter, Emma, struggle with anger. She did not like what we'd told her, and so she began to protest. We did not listen to the protests, so she got louder. Finally, she picked up an expensive toy and threw it – suddenly, she got attention (perhaps even more than she wanted).

In the same way, we all experience anger or fear, and conditioned to see them as negative, we ignore the feelings. In the case of fear, we ignore the message that we're not certain. The fear escalates to get our attention, and pretty soon we've got a generalized sense of dread, or even terror – but we don't know where it came from! We don't know the question – we are standing on the ski slope debating about why we got here in the first place and ignoring the clear decision before us.

Take, for example, the "Orange Alerts" recently so common in the US. It is a system designed to arouse concern (fear) so people become more vigilant. On one level it works – anxiety increases vigilance and critical thinking. Then, over time, the fear begins to feed on itself because we can't identify the action to take. We can't "ski the fall line" of anti-terrorism, so we take action that is not constructive – such as hoarding duct tape or beating up people with turbans – anything to assuage that sense of dread. Of course, these actions do not help because they do not answer the real question fear is asking: *"Are you*

certain?" We don't even know what we're uncertain about!

In other words, we've gone from a specific, clear feeling to a generalized, overwhelming one. The emotion has begun to feed on itself and color all of our perceptions. It is even more difficult to really listen to the emotion because it feels even more overwhelming, and this generalized sense of threat is confusing and paralyzing. Our bodies prepare for the worst and get ready for survival mode. Then something comes along to provoke a reaction, and it is like a spark to a powder keg.

Who's Driving?

While some people talk about "emotional intelligence" as a way of being "smart in the way we control our emotions," this view misses the real point. Emotional intelligence is about how **our emotions are smart all by themselves**. Emotions are a system of processing information and drawing conclusions. They guide us and help us.

If a person tries to follow a map and gets lost, we don't assume that the map is bad, nor do we assume the person is broken. Instead, it is most likely that he just has not developed enough skill at map reading. With some training, his "map intelligence" can help him get where he's going. Likewise, many people have not developed or trained the intelligence of their emotions, and they'd gain great benefit from developing those abilities.

The terrible irony is that the more we seek to diminish and ignore our

emotions, the more desperate they become to deliver their messages. We go to war within ourselves, our energy is consumed, and our decision-making is impaired. Like any system, this dysfunctional relationship with emotions may "work ok" in day-to-day life. But what happens when the threats and fears pile up? When the world becomes less predictable, feels more dangerous? Suddenly, the dysfunction becomes dangerous, and the war expands to consume us.

The alternative: make peace, each of us starting within ourselves, one emotion

at a time. As we form a constructive partnership with our emotions, we'll still feel emotions that are uncomfortable, but we'll work together to make a change for the better.

Begin by changing your opinion of "negative emotions" and keep telling yourself they are your allies. Appreciate them. Ask your emotions for advice, give yourself time to listen to them. And like any advisors, don't accept their first reaction – inquire, explore, and question, get multiple viewpoints, and collaborate for the deepest possible understanding.

Thank you to Dr. Peter Salovey for pointing out that even our "negative reactions" are examples of the intelligence of our emotions.

About the Author

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