

HEALTHY LIVING

stopped cold

Fear can cause us to freeze up, getting in the way of our goals. But if harnessed correctly, the emotion can also be a powerful motivator. The trick: learning to head off that deer-in-the-headlights response and convert anxiety into action.

WHAT ARE YOUR scariest ambitions? Quitting your job to start your own business? Taking a solo trip to Europe? No matter how big or small your goals, fear can hold you back in ways you don't even realize. You've probably heard of the fight-or-flight response, an animal instinct that primes our brains for survival. When triggered by a real or imagined threat, the emotional center of the brain—the amygdala—signals the body to release stress hormones such as adrenaline. Those hormones in turn switch on the sympathetic nervous system, priming you to either swing punches or run for the door. But fear can also lead to a lesser-known response: the freeze instinct, which occurs when you think about doing something scary and, instead of moving forward, stop in your tracks. “This paralysis is the least helpful reaction to fear,” says Kelly McGonigal, a health researcher at Stanford University and author of *The Willpower Instinct* (Avery; 2011). The good news is that scientists are now beginning to understand how to overcome this reaction, allowing us to use the emotion as a motivator. Follow their tips to rein in your fear, and let it work for you, not against you.»

NEWS FLASH

ACCORDING TO A POLL
OF MARTHA STEWART LIVING
READERS,

90%

OF YOU SAY FEAR HAS HELD
YOU BACK FROM
ACCOMPLISHING A GOAL.

WRITTEN BY *Andrea Bartz*

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It might seem counterintuitive to push yourself into knee-knocking situations; aren't all those stress relievers out there designed to stop the fight-or-flight response? But according to Jeff Wise, author of *Extreme Fear* (Palgrave Macmillan; 2011), it's important to make a distinction between acute and chronic stress. Regularly challenging yourself with short-term stressors, such as taking a trapeze class or riding a roller coaster, can build up your tolerance to long-term stress and help you tackle scary situations more easily: Every time your body fires up the sympathetic nervous system, pushes through a frightful moment, and returns to baseline, it gets a little more efficient at taking you through that loop.

The first step toward taking advantage of fear is bringing it into the forefront of your awareness, says McGonigal. Do this by thinking about your scariest goals—running a marathon or starting your own business. Next, imagine yourself years or decades from now having not achieved that goal—still stuck in the same dead-end job, for example. “Getting clear about the negative outcomes of not taking action is very motivating,” she says.

Still, your brain won't allow your feet to move until it knows where you're going. “You'll remain frozen until you believe there's something you can do to change your situation,” McGonigal says. To figure out the best path, connect with people who



MELTING AWAY FEAR

The key to thawing out the freeze response is tackling your fears head on. The more challenges you conquer, the more fearless you'll become.

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF FRIGHT

Lilianne Mujica-Parodi, a clinical neuroscientist and biomedical engineer at Stony Brook University in New York, explains the mind and body fear response so you can calm down faster.

1 Fear is first detected in the brain's sensory cortexes. It is then filtered through the thalamus, which sends a signal down two pathways: First, to the amygdala, which causes you to freeze before you're even aware of the threat, and then to the prefrontal cortex, where it is more closely analyzed.

2 The amygdala signals the prefrontal cortex to “watch out” and tells the nervous system to release chemicals such as cortisol (which orders glucose into your bloodstream, priming you to fight or flee) and to speed up your breathing and heart rate (pumping oxygen to your muscles).

3 Your brain floods with opioids, morphinelike compounds that act as painkillers. “That way you won't notice the pain as you fight or run,” Mujica-Parodi says. (If you've ever been in a fender bender but didn't notice your soreness until a few days later, opioids may explain why.)

4 Once the fright has passed, the autonomic nervous system swings into action, calming your body. It often overshoots, leaving you more relaxed than before the ordeal began. “Our research has shown that many skydivers hit the ground yawning,” says Mujica-Parodi. “They parachute to relax.”

have successfully tackled the goal you hope to achieve. For example, if you can't imagine the first step toward training for a marathon, sign up for a running club to get advice from seasoned competitors.

It also helps to break big dreams into smaller, more manageable pieces. Sure, the idea of running 26 miles sounds scary, but you can start by entering in a 5K. It's also essential to clearly define what you want: Goals that are demanding but also specific yield much better results than vague objectives, research from the University of Maryland shows.

“Every time you move something from the ‘I don't know if I could do that’ category to the ‘I know I can do that’ category,” Wise says, “you grow more confident in your ability to take on bigger challenges.”

the benefits of fear

How being scared can help you unlock (almost) superhuman powers.

SPEED AND STRENGTH

Have you ever wondered why so many world records are smashed at pressure-filled competitions like the Olympics? Under normal conditions, the brain keeps a cap on how hard your muscles can work. But when the stakes are high, being scared can make you faster and stronger than you ever thought possible.

FOCUS

Getting nervous before a job interview is actually a good thing: Fear initially brings all your attention to bear on a particular threat so you can excel at figuring out a solution. (It's worth noting, however, that the effect is reversed if the fear is excessive.)

QUICKER REFLEXES

When you feel as if you're falling, you automatically stretch out your hands to catch yourself. Why? The amygdala processes a threat before you consciously do and your body responds instantaneously.