

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway®

By Dr. John C. Maxwell

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Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born into wealth and prestige, and as a young Harvard graduate, he seemed destined for success. By the age of 30 he was elected as a state senator, and a few years later he was appointed as Assistant Secretary of the Navy.

However, shortly before Roosevelt turned 40, tragedy struck when he contracted polio. It's hard to imagine the fear he must have felt upon suddenly losing motion in his arms and legs. FDR could have let the fear of living with polio debilitate him, but he rose above it. Through therapy, he regained the use of his hands, and he learned to walk with braces. Eight years later he became Governor of New York, and he was eventually elected President of the United States.

Interestingly enough, when Roosevelt became President, the American nation was paralyzed. How appropriate that a person who had personally conquered fear would lead a nation filled with fear. In steering the country through the Great Depression and World War II, FDR put his stamp on society and gained notoriety as one of the greatest American leaders of the 20th century.

Facts about Fear

1) Every generation experiences fear.

In the past 100 years alone, Americans have felt the fears of World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the prospects of nuclear war with the Soviet empire, international terrorism, and the present financial recession. Our fears change with the time in which we live, but every generation has fears.

2) Every individual has fears.

Each person has something they're afraid of. Commonly held phobias include public speaking, sickness, insects, heights, loneliness, or financial problems. Leaders aren't immune to fear, either. Peter the Great trembled and wept whenever he had to cross a bridge. Julius Caesar was terrified by thunder and would hide in a cave during severe storms.

3) Fear is destructive

Upon taking office, FDR saw the crippling effects of fear creeping across the USA. That's why, in his first inaugural address, he famously told Americans, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Let's look at some of the ways fear undermines leadership.

Destructive Effects of Fear

1) Fear breeds more fear

By avoiding what we're afraid of, our fear breeds lack of experience. In turn, inexperience breeds ignorance, which results in even more fear. It's a vicious, downward cycle.

2) Inaction

Fear paralyzes and immobilizes us. In the words of John F. Kennedy, "There are risks and costs to a program of action, but they are far less than the long range risks and costs of comfortable inaction."

3) Divided thinking

Fear removes focus from a person's life. Like worry, fear divides the mind and prevents concentrated thinking.

4) Isolation

We withdraw from others in an effort not to have our fears exposed. As Michael Pritchard said, "Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed."

5) Procrastination

We delay what we're scared to do. In my opinion, the only person worse than a quitter is the person afraid to begin.

6) Misused energy

Fear is the energy to do your worst in a new situation. I compare fear to gunning the engine when your car is in neutral. You're making lots of noise, but there's no accomplishment.

Three Responses to Fear

1) We Can Avoid Fears

2) We Can Wait for Fear to Magically Disappear

3) We Can Face Our Fears and Overcome Them

Of course, there's only one healthy response to fear-facing it courageously. Fear undercuts personal dynamism. Instead of self-confidently emitting enthusiasm, fear causes charisma to erode and gradually robs a leader of influence.

How to Constructively Face Fear

1) Discover the foundation of fear.

Fear usually resides in feelings rather than facts. Drill down into your emotions to figure out the basis of your fears.

2) Admit your fears

We never help people by trying to cover up our failures. Admit them and realize you'll make them. Something about owning up to our failures helps us deal with the fear of making them.

3) Accept fear as the price of progress.

We have the terrible idea that we can eventually rid ourselves of fear. However, if you want to grow, then you will encounter fears the rest of your life. The good news: each victory over fear adds to your confidence and helps you to overcome fear again in the future.

4) Develop a burning desire within you.

Get red hot. Desire propels you to go where you're afraid to go and to do what you're scared to do.

5) Focus on what you can control.

For example, I can control my attitude, but I can't control the actions of others. I can control my calendar, but I can't control life circumstances. Remember: it's not what happens to you, but what happens in you that counts.

6) Feed the right emotion and starve the wrong one.

We have both fear and courage within ourselves. Here's what I've learned: you cannot purge either one. However, you can weaken the emotion of fear by starving it. Whichever impulse we feed dominates. When we feel fear, but act anyway, we deprive fear of nourishment and strengthen the impulse of courage inside of us.

CLOSING

I'll close with a quote from FDR's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, a fantastic leader in her own right.

"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.' The danger lies in refusing to face the fear, in not daring to come to grips with it. If you fail anywhere along the line, it will take away your confidence. You must make yourself succeed every time. You must do the thing you think you cannot do."



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