

BREAKING THE ICE: Are you spring, summer, fall, or winter? Please share why.

WHAT IS FEAR?

- Much of our worry, anxiety and fear comes from two of our brain's systems that are designed for our protection and self-preservation.
- One of these we know of as the **“fight or flight mechanism.”** It is the body's smoke detector. When it detects a potential threat, before your conscious brain even processes the threat your early warning system has already sounded the alarm. Hormones are released triggering a cascading series of effects in your body: your heart rate increases, blood is shut down to unnecessary functions in your body and diverted to the muscles, your blood pressure increases, your pupils dilate, all as your brain prepares your body for the imminent threat....
- There's a second mechanism built into your brain that is intended to anticipate future events, particularly needs like food or water or shelter but also threats. This system doesn't respond to current threats, but it prepares you for things in the future. This system anticipates and brings to mind things that are potential threats or simply things critical for you to be mindful of. (It might snow—take your gloves. It's cold—have the kids wear their coats. Wear your seat belt—you could be in an accident.) The problem with this system is **your imagination.**
- Your imagination, coupled with the data you receive from others, from the news, from the old tapes that play in your head, can lead you to anticipate threats that are not real, or which are real but whose chance of affecting you are minimal. The imagination can inflate threats and lead you to **catastrophize**—to assume the worst possible things are going to happen....

FEAR can be **F**alse **E**vents **A**ppearing **R**eal

QUESTIONS:

1. What makes you fearful? What gives you anxiety? As you watch, listen to or read news, do you tend to focus more on the bad news or the good news?
2. Can you recall a time when some event or interaction triggered your flight or fight response, even though when you were able to look at it more analytically you realized the threat was mild or non-existent? How can you maximize the good effects of this brain mechanism, without always overreacting?

SCRIPTURE: **Don't fear, because I am with you; don't be afraid, for I am your God.**

I will strengthen you, I will surely help you; I will hold you with my righteous strong hand.
(Isaiah 41:10)

When reading texts like this, try reading them as though God were speaking directly to you. Instead of imagining that I'll die of cancer, or that my future is grim, or that my enemies will defeat me, or that the world is on the verge of falling apart, in prayer and praise and singing I can imagine and trust that God is with me, that God will strengthen me, help me and hold me by God's mighty right hand.

"Thank you, Lord, that you are with me. Help me not to be afraid. You are my God. I trust that you will strengthen me and help me and hold me by your mighty hand."

QUESTIONS:

1. Which "False Events" (that is, events that haven't happened, and may never happen) appear most real to you right now?
 2. How can your faith help to prevent you from unhealthy worry while the events remain in your imagination?
 3. How do you believe your faith will support and sustain you even if the event(s) you imagine DO happen?
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FEAR OF THE OTHER: We tend as humans to fear those who are different from ourselves. Those differences include race, ethnicity, differences in socio-economic status, politics, religion, a person's sexual orientation and so many more. The differences can make us a bit uncomfortable, and that discomfort fueled by our imagination, our perception of the world, our culture and upbringing, the media, religious leaders and politicians, can lead us to be afraid.

SCRIPTURES: **The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?...Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!** (Psalm 27:1 & 14)

There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear...We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. (1 John 4:18a and 19)

QUESTIONS:

1. About which "others" do you tend to feel the most fear? What human differences cause you the most discomfort?
 2. Are there sources you read or listen to who tend to stoke your fears?
 3. Are there any "others" you used to fear, but no longer do?
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FEAR OF FAILURE: When fear of failure really takes over, you begin to avoid taking risks – because every risk includes a possibility that you will fail, that you will lose face, that you will embarrass yourself or people will laugh at you. Sometimes it’s not simply this. Sometimes we become risk averse because we think of all the ways the dream, vision or action we’re contemplating could go wrong. We doubt whether we’re really equipped to pull it off, and, if we fail, the consequences could be more serious than people laughing. In some situations, they could include real disaster.

SCRIPTURE: **Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.** (Joshua 1:9b)

QUESTIONS:

1. Can you think of some good thing you missed out on due to fear of failure or scorn?
 2. What was a time when you looked your fear in the eye, and toured one of life’s “beautiful mountain roads” (*WATCH FOR FALLING ROCK*) because you moved through the fear?
 3. “You are going to fail at times. So is everyone you know.” Do you hear that message as a “downer,” or as a reassurance? Do you believe the flip side of that is that you are going to succeed at times? What makes it easy or hard for you to believe that?
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FEAR OF CHANGE: Sometimes we say, with a wry smile, that in today’s world “the only constant is change.” But many times this idea brings us, not a smile, but deep-seated fear. Human beings are change-averse. Psychologists say that it’s because those complex brains of ours have a need to know – that we are hardwired to resist uncertainty, and that our brains actually prefer a predictable negative outcome over any uncertain one. The fear of change keeps some people in miserable marriages, and others from ever getting married at all, even when they are deeply in love. The fear of change motivates some to stay in jobs they can’t stand, and others to say no to jobs that would have brought them great joy. The good news is that our brains are also flexible adaptable – they can be trained to thrive even in the midst of change.

SCRIPTURE: **God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That’s why we won’t be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea... Nations roar; kingdoms crumble. God utters his voice; the earth melts. The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety... Be still, and know that I am God!** (Psalm 46, selected verses)

QUESTIONS:

1. What experiences have you already had that made it feel as though your world was falling apart? Did you allow your faith in God to provide you with a stable place to stand as everything else seemed to be crumbling?
2. What makes it valuable to build your trust in God before the next time when everything seems to fall apart?

3. How can really trusting in a God who's vastly wiser than you are renew your strength by setting you free from the need to try to control life's uncontrollable realities?

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES:

- **Contemplative prayer:** imagine God's loving gaze looking down on you as a new parent would gaze on a newborn. Hold your prayers, negative messages, worries and fears out to God's loving gaze.

- **Mindfulness:**

- Breathe in slowly counting to four.
- Hold your breath to the count of four.
- Exhale slowly, counting to four as you exhale.
- Hold the exhale, lungs empty, to the count of four.

Doing this slows down your breathing. It relaxes your body and focuses your mind on the present moment rather than on a fearful future. It is easy to add meditation and prayer to this practice. You can give thanks or recite encouraging scriptures, like God's promise we encountered in an earlier chapter: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you."

- **Breath Prayer:** a short one-sentence prayer like "I belong to you, O Lord," or "Thank you, Lord, for the blessings of today." I may pray, "You are my shepherd" or "I love you, O Lord." Part of what I like about mindfulness and living in the present is that when I do this—when I am really paying attention to what is going on around me—I take my eyes off of myself, I stop thinking about my illness or troubles or concerns, and instead I find myself thinking of God and others.