

# Why Fear Is Good for Your Health

*Fear is a protective mechanism that safeguards our safety and health.*

By [Ruben Castaneda](#), Staff Writer Oct. 18, 2018, at 1:24 p.m.



(Getty Images)

## Fear can be good for your well-being.

What frightens you? [Are you afraid of creepy clowns](#), vampires, werewolves, zombies, monsters, ghosts, goblins, witches and other Halloween creatures that go bump in the night? Or, if you're [in recovery from alcohol misuse](#), are you fearful of attending a work-related social event where alcoholic beverages will be flowing freely? For some people, fear can be paralyzing, preventing them from facing their issues head-on or trying new things. But fear can also have an upside, says Dr. Katherine Brownlowe, inpatient medical director and neuropsychiatrist at the Ohio State University's Harding Hospital. Humans and other animals feel fear, which for centuries has served as a protective mechanism. "It basically keeps you from dying," Brownlowe says. "If there's a threat in your environment that could put you or your family in danger, it's important to be able to assess it quickly. When you hear or see something that could be dangerous, our brains and bodies have an immediate fear response. You have a heightened sense of awareness of your surroundings, your heart starts to beat faster, your pulse quickens and your blood races toward your muscles."



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## To fight, or flee?

This physiological reaction, widely known as the fight-or-flight response, affects the amygdala – the part of the brain that mediates and enhances our fear response. When fear kicks in, your brain has to assess how immediate and dangerous the potential threat is. Boiled down, your brain must quickly determine: "Do I need to do anything about this, or am I OK?" Brownlowe says. This response was crucial for the survival of people early in the history of humankind, during the hunter-gatherer era, as far back as 2 million years ago. "Early humans would walk into the woods to try to find dinner," Brownlowe says. "The early human who noticed a predator soonest and ran away and didn't get eaten lived to pass along his or her genes to the next generation." Today, life for humans is very different, of course. "Sitting in my office, I'm not about to be eaten by a bear, which is great," Brownlowe says. While humans today typically don't have to worry about becoming a meal for a large predator, they face many different types of fears. Here are nine ways in which fear can have an upside:



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## 1. Scary sounds in the dark

A woman walks down a dark street alone at night, and she hears noises behind her, which [causes her heart to speed up](#) in the fight-or-flight response, Brownlowe says. Alone and defenseless, she picks up the pace and gets to her car sooner and safely. "Fear is really protective," Brownlowe says. "It allows us to have a rapid response to something without having to think much about it. It quickly shifts from the thinking part of our brain to the reaction part."



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## 2. A youngster's fear of guns

A young boy is visiting a friend's house, when the playmate suggests they retrieve his father's gun to play "cops and robbers" or "army." Because his parents have talked to him about [the danger of playing with firearms](#), the visiting youngster feels pangs of fear. Brownlowe says, rather than joining his friend in a dangerous game with a firearm, the visiting child alerts an adult, who stops the playmate from retrieving the weapon, keeping everyone safe. "Fear is normal and appropriate because it helps us know what is important," Brownlowe says. "The young boy was aware of the dangers and how to react in order to keep safe."



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### 3. Diabetes terror

During [your annual physical](#), your doctor tells you your blood test shows a blood sugar level so high that you're very [close to being diabetic](#). You have friends and family members who've undergone amputations because of their [diabetes](#), so the prospect of contracting the disease is terrifying. The doctor says [you need to lose weight](#) to get your blood sugar level into a healthy range and refers you to a registered dietitian. You follow the dietitian's recommendations to cut down on sugar and processed foods, eliminate sugary drinks and bump up your intake of fruits and vegetables. After a year, you've dropped 15 pounds, and you're no longer close to being diabetic. You maintain a healthy fear of diabetes and continue following your healthier eating regimen. "We often think of fear in a negative light, but it has a powerful motivating effect," says Dr. Robert Danoff, an osteopathic physician. He's director of the family medicine and combined family medicine/emergency medicine programs for Jefferson Health Northeast in Philadelphia. "I counsel my patients to lean into that feeling if it's helping to create positive change."





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#### 4. Relapse anxiety

A woman [in recovery from misuse of alcohol and drugs](#) has to attend a work-related social gathering where alcoholic beverages will be flowing freely, and she fears relapsing. She knows that taking even one drink of beer or liquor could wipe out however much sober time she's accumulated and send her hurtling back into the hell of her addiction, says Anita Gadhia-Smith, a psychotherapist who practices in the District of Columbia and suburban Maryland. She's the author of "From Addiction to Recovery: A Therapist's Personal Journey." To avoid seeing her worst fears realized, the woman develops a plan: She'll arrive at the event early and leave promptly, after she's said hello to everyone she needs to see. Or, she'll arrive later, when people are well into the festivities, say her hellos and leave early, her sobriety intact. While she's there, the woman keeps a glass of cranberry juice or water in her hand to discourage anyone from offering her a drink. "You can go late, leave early and you will still get the same credit as everyone else who attended for the full duration," Gadhia-Smith says. "The important thing is that you showed up."



(Getty Images)

## 5. Fear of death

At some point, [everyone fears that someone they're close to will die](#). "This is a universal fear experienced by anyone who loves someone else," Gadhia-Smith says. "The price of love is grief, and ultimately, we know that everyone and everything that we love is going to pass at some point in time. That is reality." This fear can have a positive aspect, if you accept that everyone you care about will one day die and that loss is an inevitable part of life that everyone, not just you, experiences, Gadhia-Smith says. Then, you can mindfully focus on making the most out of each experience and day with the people you care about. "This fear will certainly come to pass, but we can make our lives with the people that we love as meaningful as possible. We can make every day count, knowing that our days with everyone and everything are numbered," Gadhia-Smith says. "This is called conscious awareness of death and of life, and living mindfully. We stay in the moment and we appreciate every single thing that has been given to us in this day."



(Getty Images)

## 6. Replacement anxiety

Many [professional athletes](#) report a fear of being replaced and losing their livelihood because of poor performance, says Eric C. Wood, associate director of TCU Counseling and Mental Health in Fort Worth, Texas. To maintain their position on their team, these athletes spend countless hours doing strength and conditioning workouts, and getting themselves into the best possible physical condition. This sort of dedication, along with the fear of disappointing loved ones and coaches, can "increase focus, effort and performance," Wood says. Such fears can also extend to nonathletes. "The fear of failure, the fear of being replaced by someone better [and] the fear of shame are all applicable to areas such as business, dating and politics," he says. Provided these fears are kept in perspective and don't become paralyzing, they can have positive effects. "Without such fears, many people would suffer a decline in performance in their work lives, be less satisfied in their relationships and engage in more socially unacceptable behaviors," Wood says.





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## 7. Cancer terrors

Being terrified of contracting serious medical conditions that have a genetic component can spur people to get screening they might otherwise forgo, says Jonathan Alpert, a psychotherapist and performance coach based in New York City. He's the author of the book "Be Fearless: Change Your Life in 28 Days." For example, a healthy man in his 30s watches his father undergo emergency surgery to remove [a cancerous tumor in his colon](#). Furthermore, his dad undergoes a painful post-surgery regimen of chemotherapy and has to have a temporary colostomy. Though the American Cancer Society recommends colorectal cancer screening starting at age 45 for men and women, the man has his first colonoscopy at age 38 because he wants to avoid the misery his father experienced. Every five years, he faithfully has a colonoscopy; his doctors find and remove at least one potentially precancerous polyp during each screening. "The fear of being diagnosed [with colon cancer] is what drives him [to be screened]," Alpert says.



(Getty Images)

## 8. Suicide fears

All living beings have a survival instinct, and in order to attempt suicide, [one's desire to die must be stronger than his or her instinct to survive](#), says Jaime W. Vinck, chief executive officer of Sierra Tucson, a residential treatment center in Tucson. The facility treats [substance misuse disorder](#), [depression](#), anxiety, trauma, [chronic pain](#) and co-occurring disorders. "The challenge with suicidal individuals is that they sadly fear life more than they fear death," Vinck says. "[The] self becomes something to be escaped rather than embraced, and someone to be loathed rather than worthy of love." For some people who have suicidal thoughts, fear of the act of taking their own life is a deterrent. Research suggests that the ability to enact self-injury is a significant factor to suicide. "When one fears death, the likelihood of suicide completion is reduced due to fear of physical pain of the experience, fear of punishment in the afterlife and what happens to those who are left behind," Vinck says.



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## 9. Skin cancer worries

Many people aren't aware of the [dangers of skin cancer](#) until someone they know develops the disease, Wood says. "I've seen multiple examples of young adults who were not aware of the risks for skin cancer," he says. "These individuals would often spend hours sunbathing and not focus on wearing sunscreen during outdoor activities. Unfortunately, awareness of susceptibility typically developed after a loved one or friend developed skin cancer." Then terror kicks in, followed by action. "Because of fear, these individuals altered their behaviors, such as visiting a dermatologist annually, wearing sunscreen and limited the amount of sun exposure. Such changes lower the odds of contracting skin cancer and improve their overall skin health," he says.