

What's Fear Got to Do With Business?

Fear is one of those things that has a huge survival component – if you're a hunter/gatherer on the African Savannah. But if you're trying to run a business in the 21st century, it might be getting in your way.

The four main fears that modern folks run into are fear of the unknown (what you're unfamiliar with) fear of failure (will you lose money?) fear of isolation (fear of going against the flow) fear of looking stupid (self explanatory).

Fear feels bad. It makes your blood pressure go up, your heart rate accelerate, sweat shows up in places you'd rather it didn't, your mouth goes dry, fingers tremble, the voice quavers and cracks, and your stomach flip flops.

The stress response is part neuronal and part hormonal. Repeated fear (stress) causes changes in areas of the brain related to decision making.

Fear distorts decision making. It's not just the deciding part of your brain that gets changed by fear. It actually changes your perception. This is fairly new information since all the brain imaging research that's been done in recent years. What this means is that fear changes what you think you see. It changes your perception. Fear inhibits action. Fear immobilizes. Fear changes the entire decision making process. Fear creates faulty decisions.

There's a great deal we can learn from the brain researchers that has application for running a rural business more successfully. Not only do I find the information fascinating, (so I'm reading the books as they come out) but it explains some of the baffling ways people behave that seem counter intuitive. For instance, we look at the holocaust that killed six million Jews and wonder how so many Germans could have "followed orders" and allowed it to happen.

It turns out biology is at work here. Human brains have a fear response to NOT going along with the majority opinion. Fear of isolation. It's a survival mechanism because statistically, a group is more often right than a single individual is, and an *isolated* individual will have survival issues. Thus our fear of isolation. So those Germans may have had their decision processes impaired by fear of going against the majority and their orders.

So the fear you feel (of the unfamiliar, of failure, of isolation or of looking stupid) is having an effect on your life and your business. It's keeping you from making good decisions. It's keeping you from taking action when you should. It's keeping you locked into thinking loops that do not allow for creativity.

I know, the news in the morning tells you how dangerous the world is. The news at night reinforces it. The media promotes fear. Advertisers promote fear. You might just call it worry or anxiety, but your body is feeling the fear response (stress.)

Fear can be totally convincing. But the amazing thing is that there is no reality to fear because it is about things that are imaginary. It is a biological signal to alert your mind and body of approaching danger. It's about things you think are going to "get you."

"I'm afraid I'll look dumb (or awkward or stupid or weird...)"

"I'm afraid to risk money on advertising."

"I'm afraid I won't sell any animals."

"I'm afraid to invest in a new book (equipment, bloodlines) because I'll lose money."

"I'm afraid I'll be the only one doing _____."

"I'm afraid of _____ because I've never seen it before."

In modern culture it's also known as existential anxiety. It causes humans to be anxious about who they are and where they belong. It has an impact on every facet of life, including your farm business.

You may not be able to sanitize life and eliminate all the discomforts and reversals of fortune. But beware of the fearful things that you're imagining. They're not real. When you run into a discomfort, problem, loss, reversal, disaster, you will be able to deal with it then. The old adage, "Don't borrow trouble!" is more important than ever.

Overcoming Fears

Many of you are strong, independent types. You tell me you're not fearful. And even if you were, you'd be inclined to deny it or minimize it. That's natural. But fear has many faces. When you have to call a stranger to ask for something or sell something, does it make you uncomfortable? That is a type of fear. Do you worry about things? Worry is a type of fear. Do you ever feel anxious about things? Anxiety is a type of fear. You are fearful in these situations and your body and decision-making are affected.

Fear's main tactic is to make illusion seem real. That criminal you're imagining breaking into your house isn't real, he's in your imagination. Someone is promoting your fear so they can sell you an alarm system. Do you feel anxiety about speaking in front of a group? That anxiety occurs because you're imagining them laughing at you or not paying attention or that you'll stumble in some way and be embarrassed. It's an illusion, imaginary. Are you afraid you'll lose money or not sell your product? Right

now, that's an illusion because you're NOT losing money and you might just as easily sell your product as not.

Are you afraid of the dentist? That's real you tell me. Sometimes the dentist hurts so you have every right to be afraid. So what you're telling me is that by worrying, being anxious and afraid of the dentist that will make it hurt less???? Of course not! The worry and anxiety doesn't help. The pain is imaginary until you're actually in the dentist's chair at which point you'll simply deal with the pain—or maybe it WON'T hurt. All the stress was for nothing!

And just because something bad happens, it still doesn't justify your fear. Did you ever hear the story of the young woman who goes to her doctor and says, "I'm terrified that I have cancer!" Her doctor checks her out thoroughly and reports that she's healthy, no cancer. A few years later at age 30, she goes to her doctor and says, "I'm really scared to death that I have cancer." Clean bill of health again. This scene is repeated every few years. At age 80 her doctor tells her, "I'm sorry to tell you that you have cancer!" She says, "See I told you so!"

Be aware of how much your fear is promoted and encouraged by the culture around you—the news (the economy is terrible and everyone is failing) advertisers (no one will love you if you don't use our product) law enforcement and insurance companies (your car will be stolen if you don't lock it or you'll die if you don't wear a seatbelt) medical (you'll get diseases if you don't check for these symptoms) friends and family who criticize or diminish your choices.

Okay, fear is not helping. It has decision-making repercussions, it locks you into squirrel-cage-type thinking *and* it has a negative impact on your health. We can agree on that, right? But fears come up. What can you do about it? The first thing is to acknowledge it. Denial doesn't help—it only perpetuates the stress. "Okay, I'm afraid and my fear is in my imagination about an imaginary result or possible future situation." Sometimes that's all you need. It can be a big "Aha!" moment.

Many iconoclastic thinkers report overcoming fears by acknowledging it then deciding to simply look beyond the fear for something bigger they want to accomplish.

Here's a strategy that might help. Run it by a third party. A neutral, third party with no agenda, and someone who isn't sharing your fear or critical of you. Ask them about their assessment of what's making you fearful or worried. This is helpful when you're trying new strategies for your business or in areas of education, emotional involvement or employment. Ask them to reframe what's making you fearful in non-emotional terms.

The old classic fear treatment involves conditioning. If you are afraid of public speaking, one of the best cures is to do it more. Toastmasters can help. Just giving more presentations will sooner or later eliminate your fear entirely. If your fear is like public speaking, do more of it till it becomes mundane.

Another strategy is to substitute a short term stress for the longer term one. The best short term stress of course, is exercise. It does some mental housekeeping on the neurons and hormones and can kick you out of worry and anxiety.

My very favorite treatment for the things that make me terrified, worried or anxious, is this. If the fear is about imagining a bad outcome (and it always is) I like to turn it around and imagine a good outcome in its place. Try it. It is amazing. It works every time and while fear feels bad, imagining a good outcome feels good.

The general economy is pretty pathetic right now. You can worry about it and feel anxiety or you can go about doing the things that make you successful in spite of the economy. Your success is hugely dependent on what you believe about it. Is it possible? Can you be successful? Do you think you can, think you can, think you can, just as did the little engine that could? Or do you think it's impossible in this economy?

As Henry. Ford said, "Whether you think you can or you can't, you're right!" Your fears might be all that's stopping you from taking the steps, thinking creatively and reaching your goals.

The few who look forward, while always knocking on new doors, no matter how futile it may seem or how insignificant their progress, will be successful while others just keep waiting for things to get better.