

Pain and Panic: The Demons behind Biological Fear

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"A variety of terms are used to describe fear. The Bible uses words like fear, afraid, terror, dread, anxious, tremble, shake, and quake over 850 times to portray this core human emotion. Healthcare professionals use terms like fear, anxiety, [panic](#) attack, and phobia to illuminate the spectrum of our fears." (2)

Our emotions are said to be the most subjective of all our [biological](#) components. It seems that we have a difficult time grasping them, and an even more difficult time controlling them. Fear seems to be one of the most challenging of our human emotions when it comes to trying to subdue it ourselves. When we see a creepy bug, or are caught off guard by an extremely loud noise, we jump before even thinking about it. It seems like a normal reaction, and then after the initial surprise we can assure ourselves that we are still alive, everything is fine. But what about people who have abnormal reactions to fears? People who develop a phobia that is not so easy to subdue?

These questions can be partly answered by looking at what happens in the brain when we are afraid. In an experience of danger the amygdale, a small part of the brain located

behind both [ears](#), is alerted. In response to the frightening stimulus, the amygdale sends signals to the circulatory system. Blood pressure goes up, heart rate speeds up, and muscles tense. Doesn't this response sound a lot like what we can see on the Discovery Channel? When a lion attacks, we can immediately see the antelope go into "defense mode." So basically, our initial reaction to fears is no different than the basic instincts of animals, an evolutionary response. (1)

But wait—animals do not, or CAN not get afraid of the same things that humans can. And I am fairly certain an antelope cannot be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Animals, for instance, do not live in fear that they might fail a test, or lose their job. These fears that humans develop that are not simply instinct reactions deal with another part of the brain, the cortex. Humans can use cognitive reasoning to assess whether or not we should feel afraid. Charles Darwin posed the question, "Does the reaction to fear precede the thought?" (3) The answer is yes. In studies, it has been shown that pathways from the cortex to the amygdale are weaker than those that lead from the amygdale to the cortex.

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