

OVERCOMING A FEAR

Difficulty: **INTENSIVE** | Frequency: **1X/MONTH** | Duration: **VARIABLE**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Some types of fear—like the fear that stops you from running into a busy street—are useful and necessary. But other types of fear are less rational and more likely to hold you back in life. Fear of public speaking, fear of flying, fear of heights—these are some of the more common ones.

To cope, you may avoid the situations that elicit these fears, or you may try, often unsuccessfully, to counter your fear with reason—for example, by reminding yourself of the very low likelihood of a plane crash.

Research suggests that a more effective way to combat fear is to do the thing you least want to do—face your fear head-on—but do it one step at a time, in a healthy and safe way. This strategy can help retrain your brain to develop a more positive association with whatever has been triggering your fear. Confronting your fears head-on can also increase your self-confidence and show you that you're capable of doing what might once have seemed impossible. Whereas acting based on fear limits you, facing your fears can be liberating and transformative.

HOW TO DO IT

Note: The following guidelines are geared toward addressing mild, everyday fears. Fears related to serious mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and social anxiety disorder should be addressed with the help of a mental health professional.

Sometimes one or two scary experiences can cause us to fear things that we don't rationally need to fear; some fears aren't based on firsthand experience at all. Either way, overcoming these fears often requires that we develop a more positive—or at least less negative—association with the thing that we fear. Here's how:

1. Start with small doses. The first step is to expose yourself to small doses of the fear-inducing activity in a safe context. For example, if public speaking makes you nervous, you could start by seeking out a low-pressure speaking opportunity with a small, supportive audience, in a setting where you don't have to worry about being perfectly articulate—perhaps giving a toast at a friend's birthday party. Or if you'd like to learn to rock climb but are afraid of heights, you could start by spending time observing and assisting other climbers.
2. Repeat the activity until you start to feel the fear dissipate. Over time, repeated exposure to a safe, non-harmful version of whatever made you afraid can reduce the negative association and replace it with a neutral or positive association. For example, repeatedly seeing other people climb without falling may begin to overwrite your negative association with heights. And the more you fly and land safely, the less dangerous flying is likely to feel.
3. Gradually increase the challenge. After you begin to feel more comfortable with small doses, try taking it up a notch. For example, you could go from watching others climb to climbing a short distance yourself. Or you could volunteer to present the results of a team project to coworkers or fellow students. From here, you can continue to incrementally ratchet up the challenge until you reach your goal, whether that's to scale Mt. Everest, give a talk in front of hundreds of people, or fly to a new continent.

Your fear may never be fully extinguished, but hopefully it will hold less power over you and not prevent you from achieving important goals and enjoying your life. In the words of Mark Twain, "Courage is not the absence of fear. It is acting in spite of it."

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Schiller, D., Monfils, M., Raio, C. M., Johnson, D., LeDoux, J. E., Phelps, E. A. (2010). [Preventing the return of fear in humans using reconsolidation update mechanisms](#). *Nature*, 463, 49-53.

People received a mild shock each time they saw a blue square on a computer screen, conditioning them to fear the blue square; evidence of their increased fear came from a subtle measure of increased sweat on their skin. The next day, they underwent “extinction training”—that is, they were repeatedly exposed to the blue square again, but this time without the shocks. After that, they showed a significant decrease in their fear response to the blue square, an effect that persisted a year later.

WHY IT WORKS

Fear may be natural, but it’s not always helpful. Sometimes our brains mistakenly learn to send fear signals even when there is no real danger, perhaps based on one or two bad experiences. Gradually and repeatedly exposing ourselves to the activities we fear most can help teach our brains that these activities are not in fact dangerous—and may actually be very rewarding.

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

