

Fear

*What must I pass through to find that place of safety?
I must pass through the wound because the wound is the gate.
How do I find the wound?
I find all the places that cause me pain,
all the places where I've believed the pain was being caused by something out
there.*

Stephen Schwartz
The Compassionate Presence

Our culture teaches us to do anything but feel our fear.

We are told to ignore it, to deny it, to act like it doesn't exist.

Or, we get the message to power through it, to keep on going even if we feel terrified.

Admitting we feel fear is seen as unmanly, and these days it is also viewed as unwomanly.

No wonder so few of us go anywhere near our fear!

But acting as though we are fearless just adds more overcoats to those we are already wearing.

They are full of the fears that are already present and not being felt.

There must be another way.

How can we face our fear without giving in to it?

How might we feel our fears without letting them stop us?

As we awaken, how does our relationship to fear change?

Fear of Feelings

Fear is a special category of feeling.

And fear, more than any other feeling, affects our ability to feel what is going on within us.

Our fear of our feelings can keep us from even going near them.

Many of us have heard ourselves say something like this:

“I’m afraid if I start to cry, I might never stop.”

“If I ever really let myself feel how angry I am, I’m scared I might do some damage.”

“I’m worried people will think I’m crazy if I ever reveal how intense my feelings are.”

We might also notice deep, unconscious beliefs about our feelings.

They might sound like this:

My feelings are way more powerful than I know what to do with. They’re bigger than I am.

If I open the door to my feelings, I’ll be overwhelmed, swept away in the deluge.

So many feelings have built up inside that I’ll be nonfunctional if I ever start to let them out. My life will fall apart.

If I ever show others all of my feelings, they will decide I’m crazy -- sick -- and reject me.

If these beliefs were true, it certainly wouldn't make sense to go anywhere near our feelings.

But are they?

Do we really know for sure what will happen if we walk up to the edge of that knot of fear in our belly, sit down beside it and befriend it?

Is it certain that we will get swept into a black hole of emotion from which we will never emerge?

It is possible to question our fears, rather than automatically believing them.

This puts us back in the center of our lives, instead of at the edge, grasping for something to hang on to.

Our fear of our feelings can cause us to adopt coping strategies.

Some of us vehemently deny that we even *have* any troubling feelings.

Others live in their heads, explaining away their feelings without ever feeling them.

There are those who make their lives all about practicalities, leaving no room for feelings.

These people often say, "I'm too busy to have any feelings."

Another version of this is saying, whenever a challenge arises, "Just deal with it."

Our fear of our feelings can keep us from feeling anything at all.

As we become aware that the fear of our emotions is keeping us from feeling, we realize how dry and lifeless our existence has become.

When we fear our feelings yet sense it would be helpful to move toward them, we can begin by simply acknowledging that fear is present.

We learn to recognize the telltale signs of fear as it manifests in us.

Bodily symptoms such as a knotted-up belly, a tight throat, a clenched jaw.

Mind-stuff: *What's the point in stirring up that hornets' nest? Leave it alone.*

Emotional reactions: Anger, when someone suggests it might be helpful to investigate our feelings around an issue. Prickliness. Guardedness. Defensiveness.

And the classic strategies of our overcoats to get us to look anywhere but at them:

Distraction.

Avoidance.

Denial.

Glossing over.

Belittling the importance of what we are feeling.

Recognizing these signs that fear is present is a first step in facing and eventually embracing our fears.

Fear of Our Fears

If we fear our feelings, we probably **really** fear our fears.

Many of us find that our fear of our fear keeps us from even admitting we have any fears.

“Me, afraid? No way.”

This can result in a life that resembles a series of movie stunts. It's all action and adventure, with little or no interior awareness.

These people wear overcoats of avoidance, denial, and rejection of feeling.

They are not free to *have* feelings -- emotions must be controlled, managed, limited, curtailed.

If the opposite reaction takes hold, people find their lives circumscribed by all the fears they don't know they have.

They give themselves a million reasons why it doesn't make sense to take risks, when all the while their unconscious fears load them up with overcoats.

In either case, whether we are more like a daredevil or a shrinking violet, fear is at the root of our outer behavior.

Fear we don't even know we have.

Our unconscious fears cause us to do, or not do, all kinds of things.

We may believe our conscious minds are at the helm of our lives, when, in reality, these deep-seated fears we do not even know are there lead us to "decide" and "choose" to live in limited ways.

A fundamental issue, then, is whether we can even admit that fears are present within us.

We may need some evidence to accept that.

If we are not willing and able to be with whatever is arising in the current moment -- if we shut down our awareness with our addiction of choice many times during each day -- it is probably because unconscious fears prevent us from going near what is happening.

And since fear lies at the bottom of many other feelings, our fear of our fear may prevent us from feeling the other emotions that are present.

It's as if something in us knows that if we begin to feel what is there, the trail may well take us down, down, down into the subterranean realm where fear lives.

And then what?

The black hole syndrome.

We feel sure that we will be sucked down, never to reappear again.

We fear being overwhelmed by the fears lurking there.

We fear we are inadequate to confront them -- they seem bigger and stronger than we are.

We might believe we need to know how to deal with the fears.

Maybe we think we should know how to make them go away.

And since we don't have a clue about how to do that, it may seem to make more sense to just not go there.

But this is not the way we get free.

So, the challenge is: Can we admit that fears are present within us?

Once we confess that, it is possible to go toward the fears and see what they reveal about themselves.

It helps to remember that every fear is based on a belief (more about this in the next chapter).

We can often hear the belief within the fear itself.

"I'm afraid if I ever start to look at my fears, they will take over my life."

Do you hear the belief in that fear-statement?

The degree to which a fear runs our life exactly correlates with how strongly we agree that the underlying belief is true.

And the amount of unfelt fear within us dictates how many of our other emotions we are willing to face and go into.

As we begin to admit that fear lies within us, we find ourselves more able to be with the other emotions that are also present.

The universal antidote for fear is love.

When we can find love and compassion for ourselves and what we are experiencing, we are more able to face and embrace whatever is there.

Cultivating self-empathy while developing the consciousness skills presented in this book enables us to turn toward our feelings instead of away from them.

We stop relegating them to the back alley of our psyche, and invite them in.

Making a place at the table for our emotions, we pour them a cup of tea.

As we get to know some of our milder, less-threatening feelings, we feel emboldened to keep going toward the deeper, stronger ones.

We discover that our fear of our feelings was much scarier than the feelings themselves.

Overcoats of repression peel away, and a lighter, brighter sense of self and life emerges from beneath them.

