

Fear During Pandemic Times: A Needs-Based Therapy Process

By Myra Walden

Dear friends, here we are, faced with the threat of loss and misfortune. Understandably, fear is running high. We may fear death, losing a loved one, or losing our job and with it, basic security. You may be thinking things like these: “Will I die?” “Will my mom make it? She’s 79.” “My savings are dwindling down; the last month I can pay rent is August. And then what?” “I am so scared!”

You are in good company. For some of us, the threat is real, but not imminent. If you have not contracted the illness, have not lost a loved one, and if your basic needs are met, this article can help. If you are suffering from the illness or a great loss, you may also benefit from the process I will share below, but I want to acknowledge your pain, express sincere care, and propose *mourning* – the subject of another article.

Let me begin by asking, what is the cause of fear? Some of you may say, “Obviously, Myra, the health crisis!” *I propose that in the absence of imminent danger, the cause of fear is – **thought!*** Fear is a helpful emotion that impels us to action in the face of threat. However, in the absence of immediate threat, it is debilitating and not useful in any way. Below is a process I developed to help me and my clients deal with fear within a Needs-Based Therapy (NBT) framework. NBT is the application of Nonviolent Communication to mental health. I can attest to its efficacy because I have freed myself from fear, largely, and it has helped my clients, per report.

Free at Last! *

Most of us avoid fear. In my experience, this exacerbates it. The following process invites you to enter fear fully, connect with it, and watch it dissipate. A man who went through the process and benefited from it said, “At first, the fear was chasing me. Then, I was chasing the fear.”

You may do this process on your own or with a trusted friend, remotely. If alone, beforehand, if possible, ask someone if they would be available should you need empathy later. Set aside 30-40 minutes. Go to a place where you can be alone and without interruptions. This may require doing the process after everyone has gone to bed. Bring paper and a pen, and write down your answers to the questions.

Raising Awareness

1. How do you feel about experiencing fear? Do you dread it? If so, what are you afraid could happen if you feel fear?
2. How do you deal with fear, typically?
 - a. **ESCAPE:** Doing something to distract you.
 - b. **SUPPRESSION:** Thinking thoughts to counteract fear, e.g., “This will probably never happen.”

In my view, employing these two strategies regularly runs the risk of fear becoming clinical anxiety.

3. Think of a fear of yours and identify the underlying needs. Has a similar situation happened to you in the past? Examples:

Fear: “I’m afraid I’ll get sick and die; I have diabetes. Who will take care of my kids?”

Needs: To live, to have health and vitality, to take care of my children, to protect them

Past Experience: “My mother died when I was 16; I still needed her so much.”

Fear: “I’m so afraid to get infected. They say it’s horrible; you can’t breathe!”

Needs: Health, vitality, well-being

Past Experience: “My neighbor Susan got the virus and she’s very sick. She’s only 29.”

Fear: “I’m afraid I’ll lose my job. We’ll be evicted.”

Needs: Security, stability, shelter

Past Experience: “I lost my job in 2011. It was hard to make ends meet.”

When you think of this fear, what do you imagine could happen? Follow the thought to the end. Don’t make up a dreaded scenario for this exercise. Instead, bring to awareness a scenario that you do dread. Write it down. Example:

“I fear losing my job. We would get evicted; we would have to go live with my parents; we’d be fighting all the time. I couldn’t stand it!”

Transforming Fear

1. Imagine the worst scenario as if it were happening right now. For example, visualize yourself living with your parents and having a fight with your mother.

2. **Connect** with the fear. Where in your body do you feel it? What physical sensations do you notice? Example: shallow breath, tight chest, sweating. Rate the fear on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is mild and 10 is intense.
3. **Stay connected to this fear by thinking of the dreaded scenario, giving it full attention for 3-5 minutes. Set a timer if you have one. If your mind wanders, keep bringing to mind the feared scenario. Notice sensations and thoughts. Locate fear in the body and notice if it travels. Refrain from trying to understand, justify, transform, or lessen the fear in any way.**
4. When the timer rings, rate your fear. If it has gone down to 1 or 2, proceed to the next step. If it's 3 or above, take three deep breaths and go through step #3 again.
5. Another day, do the process choosing another fear until you become fairly free of fear.

Regaining a Sense of Safety

Connecting with fear can be upsetting. The following is a process I developed to promote calm. I call it **Inner Silence** meditation.

1. Sit in a comfortable chair with the feet flat on the floor, the knees below the feet, the elbows below the shoulders, the arms resting on your lap, the back, neck, and head forming a straight line, and the chin parallel to the floor.
2. Take three deep breaths. Follow the air as it enters and leaves your nostrils.
3. Ring a Tibetan bowl, if you have one, and follow the sound until it ends.
4. Bring your attention to each of the following parts of your body: the feet, the legs, the buttocks, the lower back, the middle back, the upper back, the abdomen, the stomach, the chest, the shoulders, the arms, the hands, the fingers, the neck, the face, the forehead, the eyebrows, the space between the eyebrows, the eyelids, the eyes, the cheeks, the mouth, the tongue, the chin, the jaw.
5. Survey the body and observe areas of tension. Simply notice them.
6. Place a hand in the middle of your chest. Notice the silence within.
7. Let go of thoughts by repeating in your mind the word "peace." Every time you notice a thought, feeling, image, or sound, repeat silently "peace" and let go of the stimulus.

8. Rest in the inner silence for 10 minutes, or more if you wish, coming back to it over and over again. Set a timer if you have one; choose a gentle tone so that you are not startled when it rings.
9. When the timer rings, notice the air on your skin. Move your fingers and toes.
10. Come back to the room slowly preserving in your body, mind, and heart a sense of peace.
11. If you feel upset during the day, place a hand in the middle of your chest, close your eyes, and rest in the inner silence for three minutes to restore calm.

Meeting Needs

As you may have discovered, fear is closely linked to difficult past experiences and current unmet needs. Sometimes, the need is to mourn a loss from the past. Ask yourself, “What action can I take right now that would move me in the direction of meeting my needs?” Close your eyes. Wait in silence. Allow a response to arise from intuition. If it does, write it down. If not, live with the unanswered question and pose it to yourself every day or two until a strategy emerges. The purpose of allowing the strategy to arise from intuition vs. thinking is that, in my view, it is likely to be more effective.

Self-Soothing

Following are some suggestions to soothe yourself further:

- Visualize yourself in a safe place, e.g., your favorite room, a beautiful nature setting, or a sacred place and listen to relaxing music.
- If possible, ask for a hug or any other form of touch you would enjoy.
- Take a warm bath or shower.
- Light a candle and look at the flame while you play relaxing music.
- Take a walk in nature.
- Do yoga.
- Do progressive relaxation, or listen to a yoga nidra guided meditation on YouTube.

*If you suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, do this process with the support of a mental health professional. Instead of noticing physical sensations for several minutes, do so in 3-5 seconds intervals and take three deep breaths between intervals. Increase the duration, gradually.

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