

Rewiring Your Relationship with Fear

What fear actually is — and how to stop letting it run your life

A client education handout from Becky Kronske, LCPC

What Fear Actually Is

Fear is not a character flaw. It is not weakness. It is not a sign that something is wrong with you. Fear is your nervous system doing exactly what it was designed to do — protect you from perceived threat.

The problem is that your nervous system cannot tell the difference between a physical threat and an emotional one. It responds to the possibility of rejection, failure, humiliation, or loss the same way it responds to physical danger — with the same chemicals, the same body sensations, the same urgency to act.

Fear is not a signal that you are in danger. It is a signal that your nervous system believes you might be. Those are very different things.

The Fear Response in Your Body

When your brain detects threat — real or perceived — it triggers a cascade:

1. **Amygdala fires** — the brain's alarm system activates before conscious thought arrives. This happens in milliseconds.
2. **Stress hormones release** — cortisol and adrenaline flood the body, preparing it to fight, flee, or freeze.
3. **Higher thinking goes offline** — the prefrontal cortex (your rational mind) gets less blood flow. Logic becomes harder to access.
4. **Body mobilizes** — heart rate rises, muscles tense, breathing shallows, digestion slows. The body is ready for emergency action.
5. **Urgency takes over** — everything narrows to the perceived threat. Nuance, perspective, and creativity become temporarily unavailable.

This response is brilliant for surviving a predator. It is less useful when the "threat" is a difficult conversation, a creative risk, or someone's disapproval.

The Two Kinds of Fear

1. **Present-moment fear** — something is actually happening right now that requires your attention. This fear is useful. It is grounded in current reality.

2. Stored fear — old threat responses still running in your nervous system from experiences that are over. This fear is a recording, not a live broadcast. It feels just as real, but it is responding to the past, not the present.

Most of the fear that limits people's lives is stored fear — the nervous system's memory of what was dangerous once, still firing as if that danger is present now.

How to tell the difference:

- **Present-moment fear:** Is proportionate to what's actually happening. Fades when the situation resolves. Points to a specific, identifiable current threat.
- **Stored fear:** Feels disproportionately intense. Persists even when the situation is objectively safe. Is often triggered by things that remind your nervous system of old experiences — not the experiences themselves.

What We Usually Do With Fear — and Why It Backfires

- **Avoid it:** We stop doing the things that trigger fear — which feels like relief but actually teaches the nervous system that the fear was warranted. Avoidance grows fear over time.
- **Fight it:** We try to think our way out, argue with ourselves, or use willpower to push through. This works temporarily but exhausts the system and doesn't address the root.
- **Numb it:** We use food, alcohol, busyness, screens, or other strategies to turn the volume down. The fear goes underground but continues running.
- **Perform around it:** We become very good at functioning despite the fear — appearing confident, capable, fine — while the fear runs quietly underneath, shaping our decisions without our awareness.

None of these strategies are wrong — they were adaptive. They helped you survive. The question is whether you want to keep running them, or whether you're ready to try something different.

A Different Approach: Working With Fear

Rewiring your relationship with fear doesn't mean eliminating it. It means changing how you relate to it — moving from automatic reaction to conscious response.

The PAUS Practice

When you notice fear activating, try moving through these four steps:

- **P — Pause**

Before you react, create a moment of space. Even one breath. This interrupts the automatic response and begins to bring the prefrontal cortex back online.

- **A — Acknowledge**

Name what you're feeling without judgment. "I notice fear right now." "My nervous system is activated." Naming the experience engages the observing mind and slightly reduces the intensity of the emotion.

- **U — Understand**

Ask: Is this present-moment fear or stored fear? What is this fear actually about? What does it believe will happen? Get curious rather than combative.

- **S — Separate**

Remind yourself: I am not my fear. I am the awareness observing it. The fear is a signal from my nervous system — not a command, not the truth, and not the whole story.

Regulating the Nervous System in the Moment

Because fear lives in the body, the most direct path to regulation is through the body. These are not coping mechanisms to suppress fear — they are tools to signal safety to your nervous system so your higher brain can come back online.

- **Extended exhale breathing**

Inhale for 4 counts, exhale for 6–8 counts. The extended exhale activates the parasympathetic nervous system — your body's natural brake pedal. Even 3–5 cycles can measurably shift your state.

- **Orienting**

Slowly look around the room. Name 5 things you can see. Let your eyes rest on something neutral or pleasant. This practice signals to your nervous system that the environment is safe — it is one of the most direct polyvagal interventions available.

- **Grounding through the feet**

Press your feet firmly into the floor. Feel the contact. Notice the weight of your body in the chair. This brings awareness back into the present-moment body and out of the fear-driven mental narrative.

- **Self-compassion touch**

Place one hand on your chest or your face. The warmth of touch activates the caregiving system in the nervous system, which is neurologically incompatible with the threat response. You are literally offering your own nervous system co-regulation.

Reframing Fear

Some fears are worth listening to. But many of the fears that limit your life are not warnings about the present — they are echoes of the past. Learning to tell the difference is one of the most liberating skills available to you.

- *Instead of: "I'm afraid, so I shouldn't do this."*

Try: "I'm afraid, which means my nervous system is activated. Let me get curious about why."

- *Instead of: "Something must be wrong with me."*

Try: "My nervous system is doing its job. I can thank it and then decide what I actually want to do."

- *Instead of: "I need to get rid of this feeling."*

Try: "I can be present with this feeling without being controlled by it."

Remember

You are not trying to become fearless. Fearlessness is not the goal and it is not possible. The goal is to develop a relationship with fear that is conscious, curious, and compassionate — so that fear informs you without controlling you, and you get to choose your response rather than simply react. That is not the absence of fear. That is freedom.

Bring any questions, reactions, or experiences with this material to your next session.