

How to deal with fear in times of crisis – the paradoxical way to change

by Dragan Milicevic on March 26, 2020

*"Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not."
-Arnold Beisser*

In the light of the CoVid-19 crisis, many of us are struggling to deal with negative feelings. These may range from shock, anxiety, fear, hopelessness to frustration, anger, and more. How do you deal with these unpleasant emotions, both in yourself and in the people you lead? Social media is flooded at the moment with advice on “fighting” or “overcoming” fear. Whereas the idea of “getting rid” of something supposedly “bad” in order to feel better is a fair and logical attempt to change your current state, it may not be the most helpful one.



The paradoxical approach to change

Our mental model of change is as follows: the way I currently feel/ think/ act is not OK. I want to change that. To use the current crisis as an example: “I don’t like this feeling of angst. I don’t like to be fearful. I want to be confident, fearless, and strong – especially in front of my team.” We, basically, reject our current state. Instead we define a desirable, future state, think about the steps it will take to get there, and develop strategies to overcome anything that gets in our way.

According to Arnold Beisser, former professor of psychiatry at the University of California, Gestalt therapist, and developer of the Paradoxical Theory of Change: “change does not take place by trying, coercion, persuasion, or by insight or interpretation to be someone we are not. Rather, change can occur when we abandon, at least for the moment, what we would like to become and attempt to be what we are.” In other words, we should not try to rid ourselves of fear but rather embrace it. THEN change will occur.

Marsha Linehan, professor of psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle and creator of the Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) calls it the “acceptance of reality”. The experience of fear at this time is a healthy response to the current situation. To expect to contract the virus is realistic. Losing a large portion of your pension is not only likely, it has already happened in some countries, with the stock market plunging by as much as 40%. You may get laid off or go into short-time work. These are all realistic and imminent threats. Why should you fight what is, after all, a natural response? Our brain is designed to react in this fashion in order to protect us. In our current situation, any feeling not associated with fear would be inappropriate, unnatural and even insane.

Many people believe that if you accept a situation, you won’t be able to change it. In fact, the opposite is the case. Linehan claims that: the “radical” acceptance of current circumstances in our lives allows for change.

How do I accept fear?

The principle of The Paradoxical Theory of Change which Beisser developed in the 70s is an integral part of today’s mindfulness practice. It asks you to move...

FROM	TO
discounting	appreciating
ignoring	welcoming
fighting	accepting

Acceptance is a result of creating awareness (in this case around fear or any other emotion). Here are some practical steps how you can approach creating awareness:

1. Direct your attention to the **emotion** and name it, e.g. “I feel fear”.
2. Identify its location in your **body**: Chest? Stomach? Shoulders? Report the location to yourself via inner chatter, e.g. “I feel the fear in my chest”.
3. Follow it with your attention in case the emotion changes its location
4. Notice your breath and how it alters. Report the change to yourself via inner chatter, e.g. “I notice I am breathing heavily at the moment”.
5. Become aware of your **thoughts** as well, e.g. “At the moment I am thinking about what I would do if I lost my job”.
6. Become aware of your **actions**, e.g. “I am avoiding checking my bank account”.
7. Share the fact that you have fear with others: your wife, kids, team etc. This is also a step towards acceptance.

It’s important that all these steps happen in a non-judgemental way.

What are the benefits of accepting fear (or any other emotion)?

It helps you move forward – Beisser says that “One must stand in one place in order to have firm footing. Only then can we move on.” Accepting fear gives you this firm footing. Ignoring it keeps you on shaky ground and you will struggle to move on.

It stops draining your energy - James Gross, professor of psychology at Stanford University, found in his studies that ignoring feelings (whether positive or negative) exhausts us physically and tends to generate a negative mood. In other words, being someone you are not is pretty exhausting and not fun.

Fear has less of a hold on you – If you ignore fear, its force remains, albeit hidden. It's only a matter of time before it pops up again. Acceptance is like a declaration of peace. The tension ebbs away.

The quality of your actions improves – this is linked to the previous point. With nothing left to fight, you become emotionally more centered. Whatever action you take thereafter will be more thoughtful and purposeful.

The Theory of Paradoxical Change offers an alternative way to deal with our emotions – in my view a healthier approach. I have tried this approach myself in difficult times. Was it easy? No. Was it painful? Yes. Was it helpful? Definitely. I am not always successful with it, but when I am, it helps to propel me forward and allows me to grow. With the excess time we have at this moment, you may want to give it a try. An opportunity to change the way have changed before. I wish you the best of luck.