

Post-Bulletin

Only thing we have to fear is fear itself

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Safety feels good; danger feels bad. Our human brains are wired with a propensity to keep us safe from any kind of physical or emotional harm.

I frequently fixate on the safety of my loved ones. My happiest moments are when we're all in the same room playing a nice, safe board game, so I can keep an eye on everyone.

If I want to get ahold of a loved one and I don't hear back right away, I immediately assume they need to be rescued. A few years ago, I saw a local news report that authorities were looking for a suspicious person who might be in the city. When I couldn't get ahold of my mom after trying for all of 15 seconds, I decided I'd just drive into Rochester myself.

Deep in my brain was an amygdala on fire with fear. By the time I got in the car, I had already written a whole story that the only way to prevent a potential kidnapping was to go and protect my dear mother and her neighbors. How I would've saved the residents of Country Club Manor with only a windshield scraper and two protein bars in the car is anyone's guess.

I arrived at her doorstep to find her perfectly fine and working on a project in the garage. "Hi, Emily," she said with a smile. "What are you up to?" "Oh, you're not being kidnapped by the suspicious person who might be on the loose in southeastern Minnesota? OK, I'll head back home."

The power of fear

This is the very powerful nature of irrational fear. Fear of any kind blocks rational thinking and sends us into fight or flight mode. As Harvard psychologist Dr. Susan David says, "Fear is an incredibly powerful force in our lives."

A significant challenge in this country is that our brains are constantly being inundated with information that increases our levels of fear. Most recently, there's been a lot of fear-mongering around national safety and security. The use of fear to distract and polarize the public is an old tactic. Today, we see it in the statements of powerful leaders and vocal pundits. Based on their interviews and tweets lately, one would assume that strangers, from within and outside our national borders, are constantly threatening our personal safety.

And yet, according to a study by Alex Nowrasteh at the Cato Institute, terrorism is not a significant threat to American lives. The lifetime odds of dying of heart disease or cancer are 1 in 7. Motor vehicle accident: 1 in 113. Poisoning: 1 in 1,355. Choking: 1 in 3,409. Lightning: 1 in

174,443. Asteroid: 1 in 1,600,000. And the lifetime odds of being killed by an illegal immigrant terrorist are 1 in 138,324,873.

Nowresteh pulled those statistics from the 2013 data of the National Safety Council and the National Center for Health Statistics. They reveal to me that whenever someone is attempting to manipulate me into feeling perpetually in danger of being killed by a terrorist, the actual likelihood of that happening is very small. That doesn't mean it's impossible; it just means that statistically, I'm a lot more likely to experience death by asteroid. And yet, I have never seen a single politician promise to keep me safe from falling clumps of stardust.

Slow down, deliberate

Leading people to believe that they are in ever-increasing danger of a terrorist attack is a manipulation. Dr. David reflects on why it's dangerous to manipulate people into being afraid, "When we are fearful ... when our mortality is threatened ... we are more likely to stereotype ... to become bigoted ... and to respond to messages we hear time and time again even if they are against our values."

To put it plainly: We can't think straight when we're afraid of being killed by terrorists.

We have other, healthier options than falling into this cycle of insecurity and fear. Dr. David suggests intentionally tapping the part of our brain that is capable of deliberate, thoughtful examination. When we do that ... when we slow down our thinking so that we're able to really discern whether something is an actual or make-believe threat, we are more capable of rational, reality-based thinking.

If you're a fear-prone person like me, know that you're not alone. Fear can be paralyzing, but it doesn't have to be. We can be more deliberate and thoughtful. We can search out readily available statistics and data. We can refuse to be manipulated by the well-worn fear-mongering tactics that have been around for centuries.

Fear is a trap. Deliberate, rational thinking is a way out.