



Fear in Relationships

"If I tell my boss what I really think, I just know that I won't be considered for the next promotion!" "I'm afraid to say no to my husband, after all, he's the one that brings home the paycheque!" "I know that when I tell my parents what I really want to do with my life they will be disappointed!" "If I admit I need help, she might leave me."

Fear: at a young age it keeps us from harm, lets us know where we should and should not tread, keeps us alert when we need to be attentive to our surroundings, circumstances, or people.

But what do we do as adults, when we find ourselves experiencing fear in our relationships with those we love and care for? How does one negotiate such relationships and move away from this place of fear to a place of safety and trust?

As couple and family therapists, we at IFL work with the dynamic of fear and anxiety, seeking to help transform such relationships into ones of love and peace. We seek to help spouses, siblings, parents, and children negotiate new ways of relating so that there is genuine mutuality and safety, a fair and equal balance of power, a sense of dignity and respect, and a home in which each person feels secure and can trust the other.

In her book, *Together & Strong: Overcoming Fear in Relationships*, Dr. Mary Franzen Clark explores the experience of fear in intimate relationships. She identifies fear as being most problematic in relationships when it is prolonged and where the danger may be repetitive or is ongoing and not resolved quickly.

In the context of family, this could be unstable behaviour caused by substance abuse, physical violence, or simply where one party is unable to control his or her temper. In these situations, the person who is being mistreated may become chronically agitated, feel unsafe and unable to relax, or may experience heightened physical and emotional tension. In situations of danger, a resource such as a women's shelter may be the only practical alternative.

Where physical danger is not present, yet emotional trust is fragile, Dr. Clark identifies six strategies that the one who is mistreated and experiencing fear uses in an attempt to lessen their feelings of anxiety or tension. They are:

1. The Sacrifice Strategy: the victim or subordinate sets aside personal needs to meet the needs of the other;
2. The Suppression Strategy: one avoids sharing opinions, thoughts, or feelings that would bring disapproval from another;
3. The Stroking Strategy: one works to gain incentive points through pleasing behaviours or actions, to be used at a time when one needs to feel 'safe';
4. The Submission Strategy: the victim relinquishes power to the other, believing that if the other has full control then that will make their world safe;
5. The Sex Strategy: sexual favours are given in order to appease the other;

6. The Scholarship Strategy: one works to gain information in order to understand the other and be able to better predict their behaviour, thus feeling more safe.

As these strategies imply, the experience of fear suggests a lack of power and the experience of helplessness by one, and the abuse of power and control by another.

Clark clearly identifies a crucial step of liberation in the relationship as being the action of the fearful person in naming and validating their own reality and feelings. This can be done with the help of a therapist, good friends, or spiritual leader.

This also moves the individual from a childlike place (experience of helplessness, vulnerability) to a more adult place (naming their own reality, validation, and exploring their world).

Frequently, such personal healing challenges the status quo and initiates a deeper healing in the partner, parent, or sibling and in the relationship(s).

Empowerment is key in the life of an individual who wishes to change the relationship in which they experience fear to a more caring, loving, and meaningful one.

Several things can assist this process:

- a good support system, which may mean identifying supportive friends, belonging to a support group, and participating in one's faith community;
- establishing clearer boundaries in relationships, allowing for one to experience less violation or intrusion from another;
- having a 'safe, secure other', whether it be a therapist, a mentor, friend, or family elder, who provides a sense of security and safety;
- identifying one's own inner strengths and 'core self' provides strength to move towards making choices and decisions;
- entering couple or family therapy where appropriate.

Moving towards empowerment either by healing a relationship, or perhaps by leaving one in which they have been abused, oppressed, or living in fear, not only enables a person to make better and healthier choices for themselves, but also frees them to establish more meaningful relationships in their lives.

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For Further Reading:

Clark, Mary Franzen. Together & Strong: Overcoming Fear in Relationships. iUniverse.com, 2005. Available through your local bookstore or from iUniverse at www.iuniverse.com

Lerner, Harriet. Fear and Other Uninvited Guests. HarperCollins Canada, 2004.

Wigand, Molly. Help is Here for Facing Fear! St. Meinrad, Indiana: Abbey Press, 2000. (For children.)



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