Phobophobia: Fear, Fear of Fear, and the Climber Mind

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Hattori Hanzo feels the fear but keeps plugging away on Creep Show (5.10) Green Adjective Gully, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Utah.
WHICH BEST DESCRIBES your typical climbing experience?

A) “Runout? Meh—they call me the Iceman.”
B) “I sometimes feel afraid, especially on hairy climbs.”
C) “I cry like a colicky baby every time I rope up.”

If you answered A, then you aren’t from Earth (this means you, Alex Honnold). If you said B, then you—like most of us—land somewhere mid-spectrum. And if C, then you’re in the wrong game, because climbing—especially alpinism, hairball trad, soloing, highballing, etc.—is inherently dangerous and sometimes lethal. It’s natural and adaptive to be frightened, even though the literature teems with tales of courage that make fear seem unbecoming. But none of us are exempt from this biological response. The good news is, you can choose whether to make fear a friend or foe.

May be you’re 40 feet out on a bad piece; or tiptoeing beneath a giant serac; or you’re on a “safe” sport route, placing your faith in the rock, bolts, gear, and belayer. In all these situations, it’s not uncommon to get gripped, a feeling you might not always relish.

ALPINISM: KELLY CORDES, 40

Notable Ascents: new link-up (A16 R/X M5 A2; 4,600 vertical feet) on Cerro Torre, Argentine Patagonia, with Colin Haley; FA of Azeem Ridge (5.11 R/X M5 A2; 7,400 vertical feet), Great Trango Tower, Pakistan, with Josh Wharton; FA Personal Jesus (M7 A15; 3,300 feet), Nevado Ulla, Peru, with Jim Earl

On the other hand, an ascent that evokes no fear is usually bland, unmemorable. As the alpinist Kelly Cordes, 40, puts it, “Those hazards represent the wildness of the mountains, in which I find tremendous appeal and beauty. If it were just about the movement, I’d stay in a climbing gym.”

CALAMITOUS CONUNDRUMS

“No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.”

—Edmund Burke, Irish philosopher

The progenitor of the word “fear”—the Old English fer—referred not to an emotion but to a calamity or disaster. In technical terms, fear is a response to a specific, perceived or real threat—a calamity. Otherwise, it’s anxiety, which typically lacks a specific source. In physical terms, when we encounter these “calamities,” a small, almond-shaped part of the brain called the amygdala trig-

Does fear help or hurt you?
Fright has helped my performance—it’s kept me alert and forced me to grow. The irony is that to get better at dealing with fear, you have to deal with it, which puts you in a situation that might be your last time dealing with it.

In the hairiest situations—like on Great Trango, exhausted and going on 48 hours without water—I’m too focussed on the moment (and too exhausted) to get freaked out. Fortunately, I’ve developed a decent ability to get into an intense ‘taskmaster’-type mode.

Any tricks for handling fear?
I narrow my eyes, flash my Blue Steel look, and say, ‘No way, Fear, not today.’ Seriously, I get scared all the time. I think it’s a healthy and important thing. Mainly, I try to conscious-

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Phobophobia

...gers the release of adrenaline from the adrenal glands (situated on the kidneys) and of norepinephrine from the locus coeruleus (in the brainstem). Adrenaline sets off fear's physical effects: the racing heart, shallow breathing, sweaty palms, and sewing-machine legs. Norepinephrine, meanwhile, causes the mental effects: hypervigilance, impaired problem-solving, and tunnel vision. Both are part of our body's hardwired fight-or-flight response (more later).

While fear's physical manifestations are universal, the triggers vary. Here's a list of climbers' usual suspects:

- **Death.** Soon after Cordes began climbing, he, while solo, botched a rappel in the Tetons. "The 100- to 150-foot fall was horrifying, as were many parts of my self-rescue," Cordes recalls. "It was a huge wake-up call." Perhaps you, too, recall a climb on which you thought, 'This is it.' Death is arguably man's greatest fear, though as the Roman philosopher Publilius Syrus noted in 42 BC, "The fear of death is more to be dreaded than death itself."

- **Your Death's Impact on Loved Ones.** Think of Rob Hall—trapped on Everest in 1996—talking via sat-phone to his wife and naming their unborn daughter before he died. As the Austrian Peter Habeler—the first (with Reinhold Messner) to climb Everest without oxygen—noted, "If I fall off a mountain, to me it does not mean a thing. I come off, maybe five more seconds, and then I am dead. It's my wife, it's my two boys that are left behind."

- **Injury/Pain.** Chess, bad landings, rotten ice, etc.—all can break you. But as with the fear of death, the fear of suffering can be worse than the suffering itself.

- **Failure or "Weakness."** Some climbers are more scarred of failure than death. This can fuel great achievement...or foolhardy decisions—e.g., courting runouts when you're shaky. Conversely, fear of failure can prevent people from truly testing their abilities—as in, they don't want to be seen dogging 5.11s, so they stick to 5.10s. Even our heroes don't want to be seen as weak: when Messner and Habeler climbed Everest in 1978, Messner repeatedly removed his goggles to film and consequently became snowblind. After Habeler later wrote about guiding a sobbing Messner down from high camp, Messner ended their partnership.

- **Fear Itself (aka Phobophobia).** This can manifest either as fear of feeling fear or of showing it (see above). As the French climber Catherine Destivelle acknowledged, "I'm afraid to be afraid."

- **Performance Anxiety (aka "Redpoint Jitters").** Although this dovetails with the aforementioned fears, pre-climb nerves about what could go wrong (or right)—or nerves about having people watch you, say, at a comp—can affect performance. "It's the time before the climb that's the most intimidating," says highball master Kevin Jorgeson, 24. "Once you're climbing, if you've prepared right, it's just climbing."

- **Falling.** From infancy, humans instinctually fear falling. Climbers inure themselves to heights over time, but not completely. Surprisingly, Cordes—who can whistle up Great Trango—confesses, "I'm a wimp...sans debilitating panic. (See 'The Balancing Act,' p.62, for fear-taming tips.) And at the high end, panic can torpedo your efforts...e.g., courting runouts when you're shaky."

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**A Respect for Risk Fosters a Low Level of Chronic "Healthy" Fear — It's a Kind of Life Insurance.**

Climbing's scariest aspects?

With sport climbing, when you're close to sending, it's the fear of not succeeding—and the responsibility for your own failure. With trad, alpinism, and multi-pitch, it's the fear of being injured.

*Time when you felt the most gripped*?

I was trying to redpoint an ancient aid route, and at the end of P5, I couldn't find the belay. I started getting pumped, traversing right, left, up, down, right again. My last gear was a small cam in a rounded crack 15 feet down—not enough to stop a fall. Finally, my arms couldn't hold anymore. I fell 65 feet—the cam didn't stop me. Spanish TV was filming, and when you watch the film and hear the soundtrack, you can tell how frightened I was!

Fortunately, I didn't injure anything.

Describe a time you've faced redpoint jitters.

On Powerade (5.14c), which had very dynamic moves. Whenever I seriously attempted it, a huge wake-up call. I've never watched Psycho.
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FEAR AS FOE

"FEAR IS THE MIND-KILLER."
—Dune, by Frank Herbert

Unfortunately, fear can kill. You probably remember a time when you've panicked—when you froze on a trad lead or down-climbed helter-skelter like a spooked horse. Turns out, too much adrenaline and/or norepinephrine impair survival. Sweaty palms and quaking legs, for example, don't help with precise movement. Highballs are even more terrifying. How do you deal with fear? Can you control it? And when is it helpful to embrace it?

FEAR AS FRIEND

"FEAR MAKES US HUMAN. WITHOUT IT, WE ARE JUST ROBOTS."
—Josune Bereziartu

As we said earlier, adrenaline and norepinephrine rev you into fight-or-flight mode. Once here, your body's first response is typically to freeze—to stop, look, and listen, assessing the situation. This can be life-saving and adaptive (e.g., freezing in place when you notice you're about to rap off the rope), but when a rock's careering toward you, the "deer in the headlights" response can kill.

In all animals, the freeze-up is usually followed first by an attempt to flee and then—if that's unsuccessful—to fight. Interestingly, climbing can require us first move toward danger (fighting) rather than away (fleeing), say by climbing up into a runout, aiming for a good hold or piece—not downclimbing. Take Jorgeson's highball V19 The Duel, Hueco Tanks. At the crux move, 20 feet over a non-landdiag, "I let my mind wander to the landing, the fall," Jorgeson says. Doubt rushed in, and though Jorgeson paused only seconds, it felt like hours. "I forced myself to initiate the next move, knowing it would silence those doubts," Jorgeson says. "It did."


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Any tricks for handling fear? I whittle down the objective to include just my climbing as the risk. If I can control my climbing, I can be safe. I usually spend a day assessing the landing, moves, and consequences. I'll sacrifice ethics for safety in most cases by employing a rope to clean and test holds. If there are [external] risk factors like weather or rock quality, I'll pass. Day two is all about trust. Trusting your skills, instinct, and spotters.


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THE LINE BETWEEN

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What are comp climbing’s biggest mental challenges?

Trying not to think about how the other girls before you did, staying calm if you fall and keeping your breath steady, and keeping in mind you’re there to have fun!

Time when you were most gripped?

My first ABS Bouldering Championships, in 2006. My goal was to finish in the top five, but I was ninth going into finals. I remember failing and not being able to breathe, I was so freaked out! That night, I calmed down and told myself it’s only a competition, with more to come. I also reminded myself there are better things than competitions, like climbing outside, and I should just have fun! So in finals, that’s exactly what I did, and I ended up first.

Does fear help or hurt you?

I wouldn’t say I have fear, but I do get nervous. And I love the feeling of getting nervous and excited! When I’m sitting in isolation and can hear the crowd screaming and cheering for the girls before me, I get the biggest smile. It gets my nerves riled up ...

Any tricks for handling fear?

Breathe, breathe, breathe. Also smile and think positively. When I climb in front of people, I try harder. Cheering for the girls before me, I get the feeling and I can hear the crowd screaming and think positively.

Any phobias?

Highballs, hiking out in the dark, and flying!

The Balancing Act

LIKE CAYENNE PEPPER in your chili, you don’t want too much fear (panic) and you don’t want too little (complacency). Here’s how to find the perfect balance.

10 Tips for Quelling Panic (to Keep You Calm)

Don’t ignore your fear—indeed, be mindful of what it’s telling you, and then move through the fear, whether it sends you up or down. Some tips:

1. Breathe deeply. If you feel panic rising, stop at a ledge or stance and use soft belly meditation. Deep breathing triggers the vagus nerve, which passes through the diaphragm and dampens the fight-or-flight response, lowering blood pressure and heart rate, and allowing you to more calmly (and honestly) evaluate the diaphragm and the consequences of reality while ignoring others. Fight that, and run through all options.

2. Keep a pliable mind, hunting new perspectives to form a game plan. Nociceptor gives us tunnel vision, so we fixate on cues that support our perception of reality while ignoring others. Fight that, and run through all options.

3. Avoid thoughts of dying. Imagining your crumpled body will only feed fear, since the mind can respond similarly to the experienced as to the imagined.

4. Repeat a mantra such as “I am calm” or “I am in control” six, 10, however many times. Phrase repetition triggers the brain to produce serotonin, the happiness neurotransmitter.

5. Separate the stakes (an event’s consequences) from the odds (its likelihood).

6. Become an expert. When things go awry, you need to know your systems.

7. Mentally rehearse the climb. Research shows this increases self-confidence and lowers fear levels.

8. Stay hydrated, fed, and warm. Thirst, hunger, and hypothermia make usicients of reality while ignoring others. Fight that, and run through all options.

9. Expose yourself gradually to your Achilles heel—be it slabs, falling on rock when he finally did it. “If I don’t fear what could happen, I could get too relaxed,” he says. “Fear keeps me safe.”

Associate Editor Kristin Bjornsen holds a bachelor’s in biochemistry and is most scared of lightning. Fred Bryant, a professor of psychology at Loyola University Chicago, is most scared of Richard Simmons.

11. Read The Rock Warrior’s Way, by Arno llgner (warriorsway.com), a comprehensive guide to mental training for climbers.

In the 1800s, miners would sometimes encounter poisonous gases such as carbon monoxide that could asphyxiate them before any warning of danger. For safety, they carried a caged canary: if the highly sensitive bird dropped dead, the miners would beat a hasty retreat. But the canary served another function: the very act of carrying it reminded the miners that their job was inherently perilous. The canary reminded them to stay vigilant and to be safe.

A little healthy fear while climbing is our vertical "canary." Since in climbing, having either too much or too little fear can be dangerous, the key is finding the optimal personal balance—just enough fear to keep you on your toes but not so much you turn a fun outdoor excursion into a terrorfest.

On January 8, Jorgeson completed his most frightening FA: Ambrosia, a 45-foot 5.14 solo on Grandpa Peabody, the Buttermilk, California. He prepped for months, but spent mere minutes on the rock when he finally did it. “If I don’t fear what could happen, I could get too relaxed,” he says. “Fear keeps me safe.”

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