



5-2009

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

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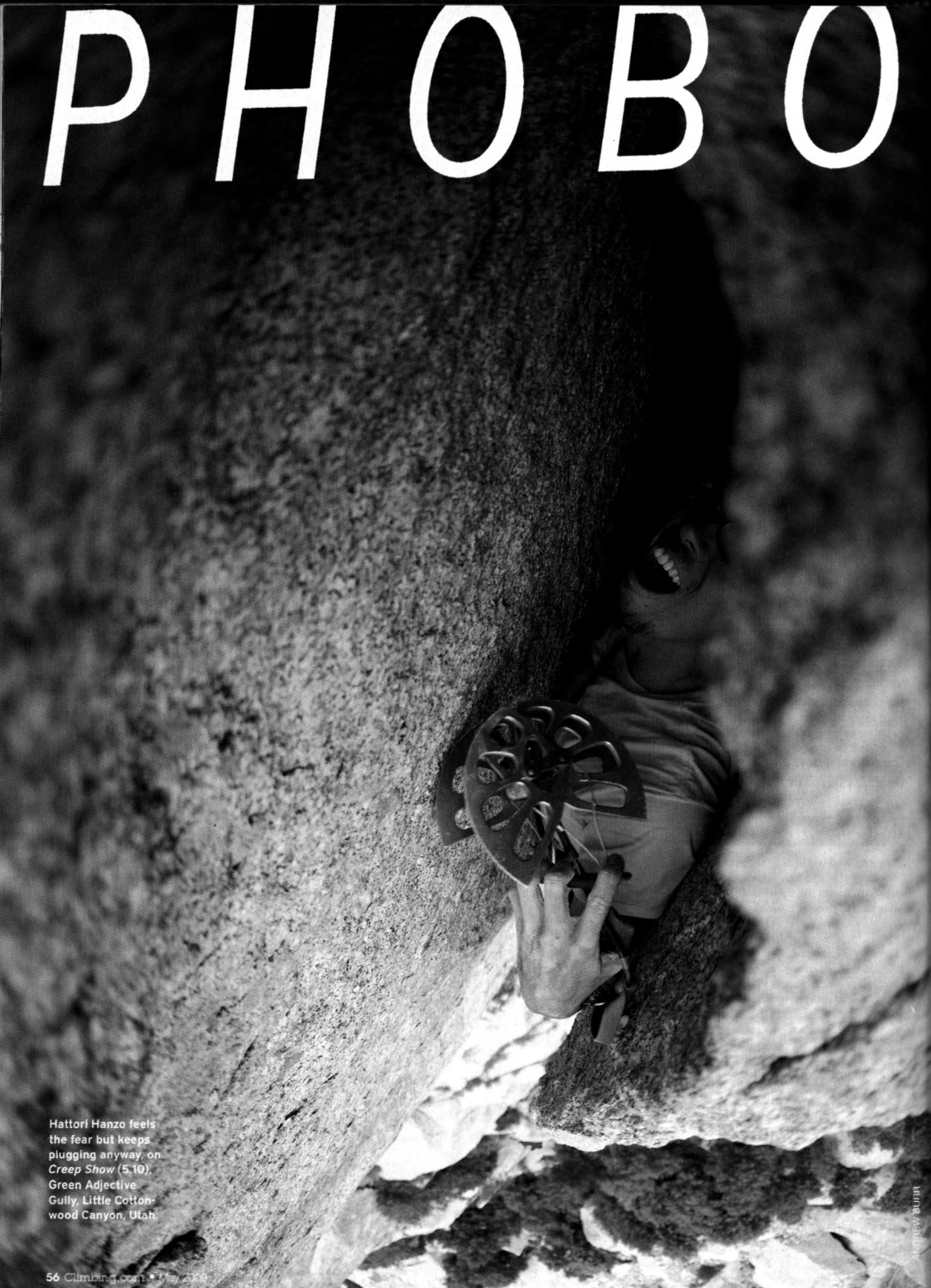
Bryant, Fred B. and Bjornsen, Kristin. Phobophobia: Fear, Fear of Fear, and the Climber Mind. *Climbing*, 275, : 56-62, 2009. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Psychology: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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# PHOBO



Hattori Hanzo feels the fear but keeps plugging anyway, on *Creep Show* (5.10), Green Adjective Gully, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Utah.

# PHOBIA

## F E A R,

## F E A R O F F E A R, AND THE CLIMBER MIND

By Kristin Bjornsen and Fred Bryant, PhD

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.

Maybe 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.

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 *fær*—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?

Fear 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-

ly override irrational thoughts and assess situations objectively. I'll often 'turn off my brain'—force my inner voice to shut up and quit overanalyzing things I can't control (as opposed to important analyses)—and just go. But this comes after that decision to 'go.'

### How do you deal with objective hazards?

We can't control objective hazards, but we can control how we approach them—it's a dance. *How active is the serac? What time of day is it? How quickly can we move?* I try to stack these odds in my favor, but if I'm not comfortable enough to accept them, I retreat.

### Any phobias?

Avalanches. I've been caught in an avalanche before, partially buried. It was utterly horrifying. ...

### Scariest movie or book?

George W. Bush running our country was scary enough.

### ALPINISM: KELLY CORDES, 40

**Notable Ascents:** new link-up (AI6 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 AI5; 3,300 feet), Nevado Uta, Peru, with Jim Earl

# 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.** Choss, 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 scared 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."

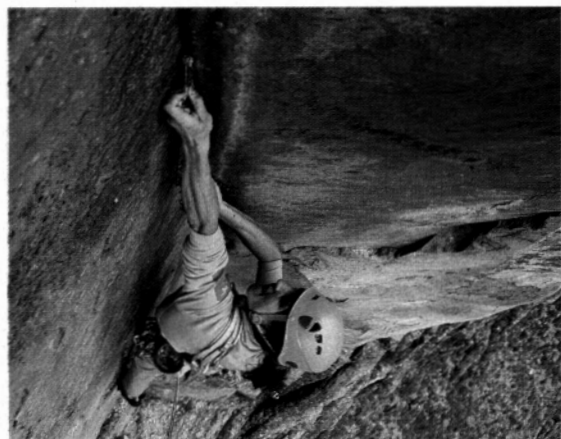
■ **PERFORMANCE ANXIETY (AKA "REDPOINT JITTERS").** Although this dovetails with the aforementioned fears, pre-climb nerves about what could go wrong (or right)—or nerves about having people watch you, say, at a comp—can affect performance. "It's the time before the climb that's the most intimidating," 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,

## A RESPECT FOR RISK FOSTERS A LOW LEVEL OF CHRONIC "HEALTHY" FEAR—IT'S A KIND OF LIFE INSURANCE.

Cordes—who can whistle up Great Trango—confesses, "I'm a wimp above a perfectly good bolt on a sport climb, [though] on truly dangerous things, that fear probably serves a more important purpose."

Faced with any of the above threats, we climbers experience anything from mild nervousness to sheer terror, depending on genetics and past experiences/mental training. At the lowest end of the continuum, a total lack of fear can make you careless. In the ideal, low-to-middle end, a little nervousness keeps you on your toes... sans debilitating panic. (See "The Balancing Act," p.62, for fear-taming tips.) And at the *high* end, panic can torpedo your control, something that can befall even guides. Take the 1865 first



**REDPOINTING: JOSUNE BEREZIARTU, 37**  
**Notable Ascents:** *Bimbaluna* (5.14d/15a), Saint Loup, Switzerland; *La Travesia de Arroita* (5.14d), Balzola Cave, Basque Country; *Logical Progression* (5.14c/d), Jo-Yama, Japan

### 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, my mind would get furiously anxious! But then I tried it once when tired. My mind wasn't prepared for success, so I had no pressure. I was relatively relaxed, and to my surprise, I sent.

### Any secrets to keeping your head?

I stay confident in myself. The night before, I visualize myself step-by-step sending [the route]. Breathing and some yoga methods control nerves, too. Once on the route, just stay positive about your ability. If the mind keeps not working right, maybe it's better to try the route another season.

### Scariest movie or book?

I don't like them anymore—they make me feel terror! Though, I'm an absolute fan of Alfred Hitchcock movies... except one: I've never watched *Psycho*.



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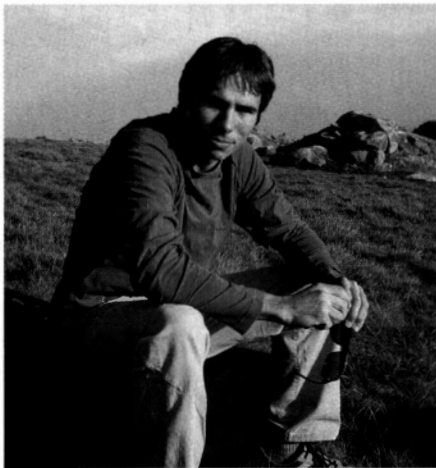
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***DON'T PLACE JUNK — REPLACE IT!***

***HAVE YOU CHECKED YOUR HARDWARE LATELY?***



**HIGHBALLING: KEVIN JORGESON, 24**  
**Notable Ascents (FAs):** *Ambrosia* (5.14 X; 45 feet), Bishop, California; *The Beautiful and Damned* (V13 X; 35 feet), Bishop, California; *The Duel* (V10 X; 25 feet), Hueco Tanks, Texas

**What about highballs most frightens you?**  
The consequences. What if you fall? Is it really

ascend of the Matterhorn when, after three climbers fell to their deaths, the two surviving mountain guides “for the space of half an hour... paralyzed by terror, cried like infants, and trembled in such a manner as to threaten us with the fate of the others,” Edward Whymper recounted in *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*.

#### 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 we 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 V10 *The Duel*, Hueco Tanks. At the crux move, 20 feet over a non-landing, “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 thoughts,” Jorgeson says. “It did.”

Whether we climbers fight or flee, it’s often best to *embrace* this evolved survival response. (Thrillseekers, aka Type T personalities—who crave adrenaline rushes—represent roughly 15 percent of the populace, though likely a much higher percentage of climbers. More cautious souls find this adrenal stimulation unpleasant.) Why embrace? Well, adrenaline primes our muscles for greater power, numbs us to pain, and causes hyperventilation. This fast, shallow breathing can increase aerobic stamina by expelling

worth it? But the most inspiring lines in bouldering are the big ones. When I see a line—a true, pure, beautiful, undone gem—unless it’s physically impossible, I’m drawn to climb it.

#### 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.

#### What’s in your head before a crux?

Breathe in. Breathe out. Go.

#### Any phobias?

Spiders. Drowning.

#### Scariest movie or book?

*The Blair Witch Project*.

the excess CO<sub>2</sub> produced by exercising muscles—important for a sprint past hanging seracs or that final crux.

Fear also can keep us vigilant—to double-check our anchors, watch for loose rocks, etc. It warns us we’ve nearly breached our safety margins and should proceed cautiously or back off. Indeed, a respect for risk often fosters a chronic low level of “healthy fear.” As the Swiss Erhard Loretan—the third person to climb all 14 8,000-meter peaks—noted, “Fear and dread are my life insurance.”

Fear may also give meaning to climbing. As the great Italian alpinist Walter Bonatti said (from *The Quotable Climber*), “Beware if you do not experience fear in the mountains. Not to do so would mean that one was devoid of feeling and no longer able to experience the supreme joy of knowing that one has mastered fear.” The American alpin-

ist Mark Twight argued, “The moment of terror is the beginning of life.” And Josune Bereziartu, the only woman to climb 5.15a, has a similar take: “Fear makes us human. Without it, we are just robots. Our doubts, fears, and nerves make us fight and try harder in every aspect of life, and give meaning to those efforts.”

Moreover, facing fear can increase confidence and ability on and off the rocks. Researchers in France and England found that confidence gained through rock climbing can actually generalize to other aspects of life and even help people overcome phobias. “Climbing isn’t a parallel life,” Bereziartu says. “The sensations and emotions you experience climbing absolutely help you deal with normal life problems.”

And fear deepens friendship—as with soldiers in battle, shared struggle in epic conditions builds camaraderie not found elsewhere.

#### 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 downclimbed 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 on the knobs of *Bachar-Yerian* (5.11 R). And hyperventilating excessively (or while at rest) causes you to expel too much CO<sub>2</sub>, leading to increased blood pH, dizziness, and blackouts.

Norepinephrine also has a dark side. While a little bit increases alertness, too much inhibits problem-solving, impairs long-term planning, and makes us pessimistic. Fear also causes “tunnel vision,” narrowing your focus and shrinking the range of solutions you consider. This traps you in your initial mental model of reality—correct or not. Take the Korean War paratrooper who fell to his death while wearing a perfectly functional parachute that

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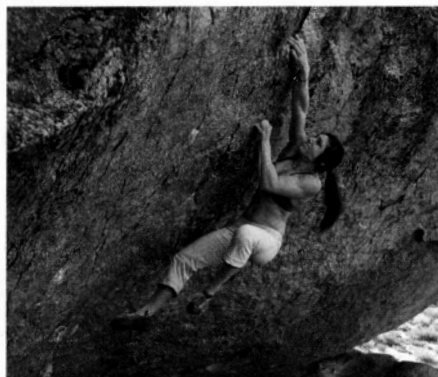
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**COMP CLIMBING: ALEX PUCCIO, 19**

**Notable Ascents:** *A Maze of Death* (V12), Bishop, California; *Trice* (V12), Boulder, Colorado; winner of the 2006, 2007, and 2008 ABS National Championships

**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 falling 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 I 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.

**How do you deal with the comp audience?**

When I climb in front of people, I try harder. And I feed off the crowd's energy.

**Any phobias?**

Highballs, hiking out in the dark, and flying!



was left-handed, rather than a standard right-handed one. Officials later discovered the man had clawed through his uniform—and skin—trying to find the ripcord, just a few inches left.

A similar “mental shutdown” can happen to climbers. In his book *High Drama*, Hamish MacInnes recounts an incident on the Grand Teton in which a climber became so terrified of dying that he unroped from his partner and tried to descend a steep glacier alone. When rescuers reached him, the frightened climber wrestled with them and had to be knocked unconscious to keep him from dislodging the entire party. Afterward, the victim remembered nothing and was grateful to his rescuers—he'd temporarily lost his mind and was simply trying to protect himself.

**FEAR AS THE CANARY IN THE COAL MINE**  
**“FEAR IS JUST A REMINDER TO GET IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME.”**

—Scott Arne, Illinois mountaineer

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.”

*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.*

**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—instead, 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 your predicament. Begin by inhaling slowly through your nose while you think, ‘Soft.’ Next, exhale via mouth, thinking, ‘Belly.’ Throughout, let your belly gently rise and fall. Do this for three to seven minutes if you can.
- 2. Keep** a pliable mind, hunting new perspectives to form a game plan. Nor-epinephrine 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). With lightning, for example, though the stakes be deadly, the odds are slim.
- 6. Become** an expert. When things go awry, you need to *know* your systems. Old-school mountain clubs used to insist pupils tie knots standing in a cold shower with the lights off, to simulate skill-set recall under epic conditions.
- 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 us foggy brained, cranky, and fatalistic.
- 9. Expose** yourself gradually to your Achilles heel—be it slabs, falling on sport climbs, snowfields, choss, etc.
- 10. Read** *The Rock Warrior's Way*, by Arno Ilgner ([warriorssway.com](http://warriorssway.com)), a comprehensive guide to mental training for climbers.

**4 Tips for Fueling Fear (to Keep You Vigilant)**

- 1. Rein** in your ego. In 2007, one-third of the National Park System's 3,593 search-and-rescue operations were due, in part, to inexperience and poor judgment. *Honestly* assess your abilities and remind yourself of times when you've messed up—you're not invincible!
- 2. Rid** yourself of summit fever. By clinging to the “I *must* get to the top” mindset, you override your body's warning systems. “People don't realize how often alpinists—at least those who've been around a while—retreat,” says Kelly Cordes. In contrast, during the K2 disaster in August 2008, eight of the 11 who died summited after 5 p.m., well past the traditional turnaround time.
- 3. Observe**—pretend a blind mouse sits on your shoulder and every few minutes you need to update him on the weather, terrain, how you're feeling, etc. This fosters a keen awareness of your surroundings.
- 4. Communicate** openly with partners. Research shows that individuals in groups often take risks they wouldn't take alone—no one wants to appear timid before his peers. Another trap is “groupthink,” in which no one thinks critically about the situation because everyone craves a consensus. —KB&FB