



Conquest of Fear and the Habit of Courage

By Brian Tracy

Perhaps the greatest challenge that you will ever face in life is the conquest of fear and the development of the habit of courage. Winston Churchill once wrote, "Courage is rightly considered the foremost of the virtues, for upon it, all others depend." Fear is, and always has been, the greatest enemy of mankind. When Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he was saying that the emotion of fear, rather than the reality of what we fear, is what causes us anxiety, stress, and unhappiness. When you develop the habit of courage and unshakable self-confidence, a whole new world of possibilities opens up for you. Just think—what would you dare to dream, or be, or do, if you weren't afraid of anything in the whole world?

Fortunately, the habit of courage can be learned just as any other success skill is learned. To do so, we need to go to work systematically to diminish and eradicate our fears, while simultaneously building up the kind of courage that will enable us to deal with the inevitable ups and downs of life unafraid.

Syndicated columnist Ann Landers wrote these words: "If I were asked to give what I consider the single most useful bit of advice for all humanity, it would be this: Expect trouble as an inevitable part of life, and when it comes, hold your head high. Look it squarely in the eye, and say, 'I will be bigger than you. You cannot defeat me.'" This is the kind of attitude that leads to victory.

The starting point in overcoming fear and developing courage is, first of all, to look at the factors that predispose us toward being afraid.

As we know, the root source of fear is childhood conditioning that caused us to experience two types of fear: the fear of failure, which causes us to think, "I can't, I can't, I can't"; and the fear of rejection, which causes us to think, "I have to, I have to, I have to."

Based on these fears, we become preoccupied with the idea of losing our money, or our time, or our emotional investment in a relationship. We become hypersensitive to the opinions and possible criticisms of others, sometimes to the point where we are afraid to do anything that anyone else might disapprove of. Our fears tend to paralyze us, holding us back from taking constructive action in the direction of our dreams and goals. We hesitate, we become indecisive and we procrastinate; we make excuses and find reasons not to move ahead. And finally, we feel frustrated, caught in the double bind of, "I have to, but I can't," or, "I can't, but I have to."

Fear is also caused by ignorance. When we have limited information, we tend to be tense and insecure about the outcome of our actions. Ignorance causes us to fear change, to fear the unknown and to avoid trying anything new or different. But the reverse is also true. The very act

of gathering more and more information about a particular subject causes us to have more courage and confidence in that area. There are parts of your life where you have no fear at all because you feel knowledgeable and completely capable of handling whatever happens.

Another factor that causes fears is illness or fatigue. When we are tired or unwell, or when we are not physically fit, we are more predisposed to fear and doubt than when we are feeling healthy and happy and terrific about ourselves.

Once we've recognized the factors that can cause fear, the second step in overcoming fear is to sit down and take the time to objectively identify, define and analyze your own personal fears. At the top of a clean sheet of paper, write the question, "What am I afraid of?"

Now, before you begin, I need to make an important point: All intelligent people are afraid of something. It is normal and natural to be concerned about your physical, emotional and financial survival. The courageous person is not a person who is unafraid. As Mark Twain said, "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear³/₄not absence of fear."

It is not whether or not you are afraid. We are all afraid. The question is, how do you deal with the fear? The courageous person is simply one who goes forward in spite of the fear. And here's something else I've learned: when you confront your fears and move toward what you are afraid of, your fears diminish and your self-esteem and self-confidence increase.

However, when you avoid the thing you fear, your fears grow until they begin to control every aspect of your life. And as your fears increase, your self-esteem, your self-confidence and your self-respect diminish accordingly.

Begin filling out your list of fears by writing down everything, major and minor, over which you experience any anxiety. The most common fears, of course, are the fear of failure and the fear of rejection.

Some people, compelled by the fear of failure, invest an enormous amount of energy justifying or covering up their mistakes. And some people, compelled by the fear of rejection, are so obsessed with how they appear to others that they seem to have no ability to take independent action at all. Until they are absolutely certain that someone else will approve, they refrain from doing anything. Once you have made a list of every fear that you think may be affecting your thinking and your behavior, organize the items in order of importance. Which fear do you feel has the greatest impact on your thinking, or holds you back more than any other? Which fear would be number two? What would be your third fear? And so on. With regard to your predominant fear, write the answers to these three questions:

1. How does this fear hold me back in life? 2. How does this fear help me, or how has it helped me in the past? 3. What would be my pay-off for eliminating this fear?

Some years ago, I went through this exercise and concluded that my biggest fear was the fear of

poverty. I was afraid of not having enough money, being broke, perhaps even being destitute. I knew that this fear had originated during my childhood because my parents, who grew up during the Depression, had continually worried about money. My fear was reinforced when I was broke at various times during my 20s. I could objectively assess the origins of this fear, but it still had a strong hold on me. Even when I had sufficient money for all my needs, this fear was always there.

My answer to the question, "How does this fear hold me back?" was that it caused me to be anxious about taking risks with money. It caused me to play it safe with regard to employment. And it caused me to choose security over opportunity.

My answer to the second question, "How does this fear help me?" was that, in order to escape the fear of poverty, I had a tendency to work much longer and harder. I was more ambitious and determined. I took much more time to inform myself on the various ways that money could be invested. The fear of poverty was, in effect, driving me toward financial independence.

When I answered the third question, "What would be my pay-off for overcoming this fear?" I immediately saw that I would be willing to take more risks, I would be more aggressive in pursuing my financial goals, I could and would start my own business, and I would not be so tense and concerned about spending too much or having too little. I would no longer be so concerned about the price of everything. By objectively analyzing my biggest fear in this way, I was able to begin the process of eliminating it.

You can begin the process of developing courage and eliminating fear by engaging in actions consistent with the behaviors of courage and self-confidence. Anything that you practice over and over eventually becomes a new habit. So let's focus on some of the areas where you can practice to develop the habit of courage.

The first and perhaps most important kind of courage is the courage to begin, to launch, to step out in faith. This is the courage to try something new or different, to move out of your comfort zone, with no guarantee of success. John Ronstadt, a professor at Babson College who taught entrepreneurship for 12 years, conducted a study of those who took his class and later became successful. He could only find one quality that they had in common: their willingness to actually start their own business in the marketplace. He calls this the "Corridor Principle." He said that as these individuals moved forward, as though proceeding down a corridor, doors opened to them that they would not have seen if they had not been in forward motion. It turned out that the graduates of his entrepreneurship course who had done nothing with what they had learned were still waiting for things to be just right before they began. They were unwilling to launch themselves down the corridor of uncertainty until they could somehow be assured that they would be successful^{3/4} something which never happened.

The future belongs to the risk takers, not the security seekers. Life is perverse in the sense that, the more you seek security, the less of it you have. But the more you seek opportunity, the more likely it is that you will achieve the security that you desire. One way to get the courage to begin,



from which everything else flows, is to plan and prepare thoroughly in advance. Set clear goals and objectives, then gather information. Read and research in your chosen field. Write out detailed plans of action, and then take the first step.

The second kind of courage is the courage to endure, to persist, to stay at it once you have begun. Persistence is a form of courageous patience, and it is one of the rarest types of courage. Courageous patience is having the ability to stand firm after you have taken action and before you get any feedback or results from your actions. When you plan your work and work your plan through patient persistence, even in the face of disappointment and unexpected setbacks, you will build and develop the quality of courage within you.

Whenever you feel fear or anxiety, and you need to bolster your courage to endure, switch your attention to your goals. Create a mental picture of the person that you would like to be, performing the way you would like to perform. There is nothing wrong with thoughts of fear as long as you temper them with thoughts of courage and self-reliance. Whatever you dwell upon, grows . . . so be careful.

The last type of courage is the courage to conquer worry — a form of negative goal-setting. It is dwelling upon, talking about, and vividly imagining exactly what you don't want to happen. If you worry long enough and hard enough about something, you are going to attract it into your life. The great tragedy is that even if the situation you are worrying about does not materialize, your health and your emotions will suffer just the same. And the fact is that most of things that people worry about never happen.

The only real antidote to worry is purposeful action toward a predetermined goal or solution. Since the conscious mind can only hold one thought at a time, when you get busy doing something to resolve your problem, you will not have the time or the mental capacity to worry. And before you know it, your worrisome situation will have been resolved.

The mastery of fear and the development of courage are essential prerequisites for a happy, successful life. With a commitment to acquire the habit of courage, you will eventually reach the point where your fears no longer play a major role in your decision-making. You will set big, challenging, exciting goals, and you will have the confidence of knowing that you can attain them. You will be able to face every situation with calmness and self-assurance. And the key is courage.