

HABITS THAT HEAL

Transcending Fear and Anxiety

Nita Lapinski

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For my family

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter I-Our Habit to Fear.....	9
Chapter II-Habit One: Fear of Future	17
Fear of Future and Control Issues.....	32
Self-Evaluation	32
Exercise One	35
Gratitude	37
Exercise Two	39
Chapter III-Habit Two: Negative Self-Talk.....	41
Find your strength.....	53
Strengths	55
Self-Evaluation	57
Exercise.....	59
Chapter IV-Habit Three: Gossip.....	63
Self-Evaluation	75
Exercise.....	77
Chapter V-Habit Four: Judgment.....	81
Self-Acknowledgement.....	98
Judgment.....	99
Directed Thought Affirmation	100
Exercise.....	101
Chapter VI- The Power to Heal	105
About the Author	123

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DISCLAIMER: The stories shared here are true and are from the personal experiences of my family, clients, and friends. I have changed the names and altered some scenarios to protect individual privacy with the exception of myself.

Fear: False Evidence Appearing Real.

- Unknown

Chapter I-Our Habit to Fear

Feeling fear is as natural to us as hearing our names. As toddlers, we learned to fear the basics: “Be careful! Don’t touch that, it’s hot! Don’t run or you will fall! Watch out for cars or they will hit you! Don’t talk to strangers, you can’t trust them.” We learned three important things about fear. First, we learned how to anticipate fear. Second, we learned that anticipating fear kept us safe. Third, we learned that if fear kept us safe, then fear was necessary and good. In other words, we were trained to think anxiously. At that time in our lives all three things were true, but we became so accustomed to fear that we didn’t notice when it became negative. I believe that **all habitual behaviors are based in fear. *None of us are born with habits, we learn***

them.

We develop habits to help us cope with life's loneliness, stress, sadness, low self-esteem, unresolved pain, and anger. All of these are based in fear. These learned habits keep us from being in the moment of our experiences. When we were toddlers, fear was good. We need to have fear of being afraid to enter a dark alley in a questionable part of town. Sometimes fear is necessary and good which is what we learned as toddlers. But as we grew other fears that were not so healthy grew too.

We dread getting lost, being wrong, behaving badly, breaking rules, believing the wrong thing, loving the wrong person, under achieving, failing, rejection, and not being good enough. We despair that we've failed our children, our families, our neighbors, and ourselves. We doubt what we can't understand and we are anxious of the future. We shun differences in each other and panic that we won't have enough stuff. We worry that we will be alone and fret that we might be abandoned. We avoid speaking our truth or rocking the boat and we abhor weakness.

Many of us can't remember not feeling fear of some kind. At a women's gathering I attended, the group was talking about their parents and sharing some past experiences. A woman,

Lizzy, smiled in her recollection and said,

“I was always afraid of upsetting my mother who was a fabulous artist. From as young as three-years-old, I clearly recall holding my breath while playing so as not to make noise and upset her. I don’t know why I did this because she rarely showed irritation with the noise, mess, or chaos, of my two brothers and I. Yet, I was afraid of upsetting her. That feeling lasted through childhood into adult life. Isn’t that funny?”

Fear has been part of us from such a young age that we can’t identify its origin. Fear can stop us from moving forward by keeping us stuck in the past and rehashing unresolved pain. Consider the following scenario:

A man watched his daughter stomp into the room and toss her purse onto a chair. “Mom cancelled lunch on me again at the last minute,” she screamed. “I hate that!”

As usual, the topic of his ex-wife launched the man into an angry tirade. As he ranted, his lips wetted with spit and released tiny flecks of saliva into the air. His neck veins engorged like long purple worms and his cheeks flamed.

In truth, anything could set him off and by repeating the same angry scenarios of the past he created a habit of judgment and blame. He blamed his ex-wife for their problems and

avoided having to look within to find his part in their unhappy marriage. What might his part have been? Was it possible that his wife had always been this way and her behavior was what he needed at the time? Was he drawn to a dysfunctional relationship? Maybe he thought he could save her, change her, or love her out of her misery? Perhaps he needed to be her savior? By refusing to consider his own contribution, he became her victim and stayed stuck in rage and fear. He could not forgive or find the gifts of his experience which would allow him to grow and move forward in his life.

We all get something from every relationship and experience we have. What we do with it is up to us. We tend to focus on failure rather than what we have gained. We learn that if things don't work out as we anticipated, it means we have made a mistake or done something wrong. How many times have we heard, "You made a bad choice," or "You made the wrong decision." By judging our decisions as bad, we make ourselves wrong, and that never feels good. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), created by Dr. Marsha Linehan, uses a "non-judgmental" approach as a central tenant of the treatment. This decreases self-critical thinking and opens up new avenues for healing. When we look at the positive, we can see the purpose

of our journey.

A client had fear of the future for so long that it was normal for her to move from a relaxed conversation into near hysteria in moments. The following is one example.

Her cell phone vibrated against the table. Tammy glanced at the screen. “Oh my god,” she said. “It’s Becky! I know what she is going to say. I’ve been dreading this call all day! Her husband had dinner with my boyfriend, Sean, last night and I know she is going to tell me that Sean wants out of our relationship. Oh my god, what am I going to do?” Stress lines formed above her brow and her mink-colored eyes widened with tears. “Oh, I know he is going to break up with me. He doesn’t love me anymore,” she groaned and mindlessly bounced her leg. She reached out and squeezed my hand. “Can I stay here? Can you stay with me? Oh my god, I feel sick. What am I going to do?” Color drained from her cheeks and her hand flattened protectively over her stomach. A wave of heat rose between us. With bloodless fingertips, she clutched the vibrating phone. She leaned forward and whispered, “What’s wrong with me? I’m so sorry.”

There was nothing “wrong” with Tammy, and there is nothing “wrong” with us either. It is only that we learned at a

very young age to anticipate fear and that aspect of ourselves has grown. Tammy feared a negative outcome from a phone call she never answered, a habit she believed was good because it prepared her for the worst. Her anxiety, both physical and emotional, came from the fearful belief that something bad, which hadn't happened yet, ultimately would. Tammy spent a good deal of her time anxiously thinking about the next possible disappointment or disaster. She fearfully daydreamt about being rejected, fired, exposed, or slighted. Alternately, she imagined or hoped that someone would come into her life and save her or change her experience, because she felt helpless to change things herself. She couldn't remember a time that she wasn't fearful. Tammy was a good and loving person who hadn't realized that practicing fear of future kept her from creating a life of happiness. Instead, she was paralyzed by a fear of things that may never have occurred. Tammy is not alone in her experience, many of us join her. Having some fear is not only healthy but necessary. Now we need to learn when it is appropriate to anticipate fear and when it's no longer helpful.

We can launch into fearful thinking many times a day and be unaware of the habit. While on the phone with a friend discussing the possibility of a baby, the happy topic suddenly

turned into fear of future regarding her future stepson, Shane. She said,

“I’m excited for us to have a baby and start our family. But when we have a baby then it will cause Shane, to act out. He will become unhappy and have trouble in school. He will resent us and problems will start and....”

Just like that, we were in the future of imagined negative outcomes, and the happy vibe disappeared. The possibility of positive outcomes is just as likely, yet many of us imagine the worst. **Because we are used to it.** I have heard many people say, “I am not thinking negatively, I am preparing for the worst. I want to be ready.”

We have been thinking fearfully for centuries. Zachary T. Bercovitz, born in 1895, became a doctor and wrote the biography *American Physician*. He was famously quoted saying,

“Some patients I see are actually draining into their bodies the diseased thoughts of their minds.”

Many times our fearful thinking habits are so deep that we completely believe in our dark and scary predictions. We have become so familiar with fear that we don’t know how to recognize it, or how to stop it. We are terrified that something

is wrong with us, and we fear being critically judged if others knew our fear. But the fact is this: ***fear is a learned behavior that we have adopted as our truth.*** Remember that we all have the ability to heal.