

FEAR-MENTAL PATTERNS/BELIEFS/PROGRAMS AND THEIR MODIFICATION THROUGH NEUROLINGUISTICS

Author: Alexandra RADU,
PhD. Faculty of Psychology
and Educational Sciences,
University of Bucharest

Abstract: *Since ancient times, fear has been a survival mechanism for humanity, which appeals to the conservation instinct of the species and which has been cultivated to some extent in the collective mind. From the simple warning of children, about the dangers that lurk at every turn, to the sacred commandments of the biblical texts, we are dealing with as many mechanisms for cultivating fear, in the form of an instrument of defense of the human individual, in the face of the greater or lesser dangers that the world puts in his way. Unfortunately, however, the human brain must be "calibrated" so that it blocks only the real, insurmountable dangers, and this is not an easy task at all.*

Keywords: fear, survival mechanism, collective mind, danger, blockage

1. From the fear of death to coping mechanisms

"Don't lean over the balcony, because you'll fall!", how many times have we heard this warning as a child, which has been deeply imprinted in our psyche, acting as a lifeline and sometimes as a threat in itself. Thus, as many times as adults, we have not dreamed of falling into the void, endlessly repeating in our nightmare the image that the adult who took care of us once created for us.

The Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud explored the concept of fear, differentiating between rational fear, provoked by a real danger, and neurotic fear, which appeared as an exaggerated reaction to a threat. Thus,

Freud is the first to bring into discussion the "mechanisms" of individual self-defense, as well as the idea of filtering emotions, in order to control destructive feelings.

In fact, fear is defined in the explanatory dictionary of the Romanian language as: "A state of deep anxiety and disturbance, caused by a real or imaginary danger;"¹, so we are talking about a state that is born deep within our being and whose cause is represented by a danger. Fear is therefore a natural emotion that arises in response to a perceived threat. However, the problem lies at the level of perception: the different way in which individuals perceive fear and their reaction to **potential, imaginary or exacerbated danger** is related to past experiences, psychological resources and social support.

We will talk about the mechanisms that trigger the exacerbated perception of danger, but also about the response mechanisms of the psyche below.

2. Factors that contribute to exacerbating fear

The exacerbation of the feeling of fear occurs when the fear becomes more and more intense, to the point where it becomes overwhelming and difficult to manage. It can be triggered by several factors and can lead to emotional and behavioral disorders.

In fact, a masterful analysis of the triggers of the sensation exacerbated by fear can be found in Franz Kafka's symbolist novel "The Trial". Here, the protagonist of the novel, Joseph K., illustrates precisely these factors that trigger the feeling of exacerbated fear that can no longer be seen as an instrument of self-defense, but that negatively influences the individual's mental and social comfort.

1. Chronic stress – Constant exposure to stressors can intensify fear, especially if the person does not have effective coping mechanisms.
2. Rumination – Obsessive and repetitive thoughts about the source of fear contribute to its amplification. For example, constantly thinking about a threatening situation or possible negative

¹ www.dexonline.ro

consequences can lead to a feeling of fear disproportionate to reality.

3. Social isolation – The lack of adequate social support can make the fear more difficult to manage, as the person does not have a support network that provides an external perspective or encouragement.
4. Trauma – Traumatic experiences, whether in childhood or adulthood, can cause fear to become much more intense in future situations. For example, a person who has been through an accident may develop an exacerbated fear of driving a car or traveling.
5. Generalized anxiety – People who suffer from generalized anxiety tend to exaggerate perceived dangers and thus may experience exacerbated fear in the face of relatively common situations.
6. Avoidance – Constantly avoiding situations that cause fear can reinforce the feeling of fear. For example, someone who avoids crowded places due to fear of panic may feel an increase in fear every time they are forced to face such situations.
7. Media and external influences² – Exposure to alarming news or information (e.g., about global crises, natural disasters, or crime) can intensify feelings of fear, especially if the person is already predisposed to anxiety.

We find in the Kafkaesque hero that when fear is exacerbated, it can affect mental and physical health, interfering with the ability to function normally in daily life.³

Exacerbated fear manifests itself at the level of some:

- Physical symptoms – Increased fear can lead to strong physical reactions, such as palpitations, shortness of breath, tremors, dizziness, excessive sweating, or headaches. These symptoms are common in panic attacks.

² In the case of Kafka's hero, we are even talking about the social and administrative system, as an external stress factor and trigger of deviant attitudes.

³ "The feeling of guilt cannot be removed by anyone, and even if it had succeeded, it would not have lasted long, because K. would still have been arrested again, but this time not because of guilt, but because of a suspicion that could not be banished by any logic.", Kafka F., *The Trial*, Polirom Publishing House, 2019

- avoidance behaviors – A person with exacerbated fear may begin to avoid more and more situations, to the point where daily life becomes very limited. This may include avoiding public places, public transportation, or even social interactions.
- cognitive distortions – Fear can lead to misinterpretations of reality, such as catastrophic thinking ("everything will go wrong") or overgeneralization ("if it happened once, it will happen again and again").
- Sleep disorders – People with heightened fear may experience difficulty falling asleep or have frequent nightmares related to the source of the fear.
- states of hypervigilance – This is a state of continuous alertness, in which the person is always looking for signs of danger and feels unable to relax.

We see, therefore, how, under the influence of decisive factors, fear can be transformed into a mental program that functions autonomously and leads the human individual to deviance.

But can this program be transmitted as a model of behavior from individual to individual? Can he contaminate the whole of society, giving rise to an absurd and deviant society in its turn?

The answer is "YES", and the examples can be found both in literature and in our "modern" society. If we refer to literature, we must necessarily refer to the novel "1984" by author George Orwell, which masterfully explores the theme of fear of a totalitarian state, loss of identity and control of thought. "Big Brother" uses fear, constant surveillance, and manipulation to control citizens. The fear of torture, denunciation and psychological annihilation dominates society. Room 101, the place where individuals are confronted with their greatest fears, symbolizes the pinnacle of this terror-based control.

In fact, a relevant quote about societal critical thinking, I think, is the one referring to the most effective way of destroying identity: "The most effective way to destroy people is to deny them and erase their own understanding of the past."⁴

I was previously talking about real-life examples, relevant for transmitting patterns of behavior related to fear, at the level of human society. And what better example can we give, than the one related to our

⁴ Orwell G. (2022). 1984, Litera, Bucharest, 2021

daily lives as post-pandemic individuals. Aren't the hysteria around fake news, isolation, frustration, so many manifestations of social fear? Isn't our post-pandemic society a society of fear and uniform thinking? Of course, we all know the answer that raises the following question: is there hope for the healing of society from this terrible existential fear? And can the already inculcated mental programs be replaced with healthier behavioral models, more beneficial to humanity?

In the opinion of the author of this article, the answer is positive: the human mind has the ability to defend itself, to self-adapt to external challenges and even has the ability to trigger its own defense mechanisms.

3. Coping mechanisms, effective methods of combating fear at the individual level

As I said before, the human brain is endowed with the ability to develop certain self-protection mechanisms, if it perceives external threats, called **coping mechanisms by specialists**.

The term borrowed from English, refers to the verb "to cope", which means "to cope, to deal with a difficult situation".⁵

Definition: Coping mechanisms are strategies used unconsciously and/or consciously by a person to avoid, diminish or remedy as much as possible the negative impact that a situation they are facing has on their state of mental and physical comfort.⁶

Coping mechanisms include all kinds of strategies that people use to remove or diminish an unpleasant mood: from distraction with something else, to complex methods, which we sometimes use even unconsciously.

Here are some examples of unconscious coping:

1. **Repression** is the mechanism by which our psyche "pushes into the unconscious" an idea or a memory that would be unacceptable to us (either it is too painful or it would say something unacceptable about ourselves). A repressed idea is automatically "put into storage" without us realizing it, somewhere in a drawer of the mind that we never look into. As long as we don't realize that

⁵ www.hallo.ro

⁶ www.minteforte.ro

that idea or memory exists, it can't hurt us. For example, if in childhood we had an unpleasant experience related to a danger of drowning, our brain can do two things with it: either choose to block certain behaviors that could expose us to a similar risk, or it pushes the experience into latent memory, without bringing it back to memory too often.

2. **Rationalization** is the mechanism by which we convince ourselves that we have done something for a logical or desired reason, although in fact we have done that thing for completely different reasons. This strategy first protects us from disappointing ourselves, and then from disappointing others. It's essentially automatically (without realizing it) finding a plausible excuse for what we've already done. Of course, this capacity has a lot to do with the place of control of each of us, that is, with the way to justify our actions through a personal approach or through an external intervention.

Unconsciously, the human psyche not only resorts to coping mechanisms that help, but also to the so-called maladaptive or negative coping. These strategies may provide temporary relief, but they generally aggravate fear or other long-term emotional problems:

- a. **Avoidance** – Avoiding situations or people that cause fear can worsen the feeling of fear in the long run, as the person never faces the problem.
- b. **Alcohol or drug use** – These behaviors can mask fear temporarily, but can lead to addiction and an increase in mental health problems.
- c. **Rumination** – Repetitive and obsessive thinking about the causes of fear can amplify negative emotions and lead to blockage.
- d. **Excessive self-criticism** – People who use this strategy can constantly blame themselves for their fears, which can lead to low self-esteem and depression.

Fortunately, there are of course situations that the individual triggers consciously and that he can even practice, as defense mechanisms in combating the feeling of fear:

1. **Problem-focused coping** – The person tries to directly face the situation that causes the fear. For example, someone who is afraid of an exam can manage their fear by preparing better and

- imagining themselves concretely in the exam situation. (We will discuss the exercise of the ability from a neurolinguistic point of view as well).
4. **Cognitive reappraisal** – Changing the way you perceive the situation to see it as less threatening. For example, instead of focusing on the possibility of failure, you can focus on the lessons you can learn.
 5. **Social support** – Discussing fear with friends or family can help gain an outside perspective and reduce anxiety.
 6. **Intellectualization** protects us from cruel reality, helping us to look at everything in an abstract, detached, or intellectual way. We often resort to symbols or metaphors, so that we don't have to look at the painful reality as it really is and be overwhelmed by emotions.

For example, a soldier on a mission looks at the objectives as if he were playing a strategy game, in order to keep his "cool head".

Starting from the previous example, as well as from the one related to the exam situation, we can easily make the transition to the "saving solutions" that our brain itself has and that we can practice thanks to neurolinguistics.

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) offers a practical approach and techniques that can help combat fear and manage negative emotions, both individually and collectively. NLP is a psychological method that is based on understanding how our language, thinking, and behaviors are interconnected. The central idea is that by altering the way we think and use language, we can change our emotional and behavioral reactions, including fear-inducing mental programs.

4. Neuro-linguistic programming to combat fear at an individual and collective level

"Every time words turn out to be the only obstacles to achieving the things you consider important – change the words."⁷ This is, in the author's opinion, the key in which we must decipher the fight against fear. Fortunately, neurolinguistics offers us some innovative approaches such as:

⁷ O'Connor, Joseph, *Manual de NLP*, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2019, p.225

1. Reframing

The technique by which the interpretation of an event is changed, offering a new perspective. In the case of fear, reframing involves changing the way you perceive the situation that causes your fear.

How it works: Instead of seeing fear as an insurmountable obstacle, you can perceive it as an opportunity for growth or learning. For example, if you're afraid of public speaking, you can reframe this as a chance to develop your communication skills.

2. Emotional anchoring (Anchoring)

Anchoring is the process of associating a positive emotional state with a certain gesture, sound, or image, so that you can access that state when needed.

For example, at a time when you feel strong and confident, associate this state with a specific gesture (such as clenching your fist). Later, when you face fear, you can use this gesture to "activate" the associated positive emotional state.

3. Future Pacing Technique

This technique involves visualizing the future and the desired outcomes in a detailed and positive manner.

In the case of facing a situation that causes fear, such as a job interview or an exam, there is the solution of self-visualization in that situation, calmly and confidently, obtaining a positive result. This practice allows to change the perception of the situation and reduce anxiety.

4. Chunking Down

In NLP, fragmentation means breaking down a big fear or problem into smaller, more manageable parts.

For example, instead of seeing a dreaded situation as an insurmountable whole, break it down into small, actionable steps. For example, if you feel overwhelmed by the fear of failure in a project, focus on each individual stage and the small steps you can take to move forward.

5. Behavior Modeling

This technique involves identifying a person who successfully manages fears and using their behavior as a role model.

How it works: Find a person who confidently approaches situations you're afraid of. Ask yourself what this person does differently: how they think, how they talk to themselves, and what actions they take. Then try to apply these behaviors in your life.

6. Mental Scenario Rewriting (Swish Pattern)

This is an NLP technique that allows negative or scary mental images to be replaced with positive and powerful ones.

How it works: Visualize a scary scenario in detail, and then quickly replace that image with one in which you see yourself calm and confident, successfully managing the situation. Repeating this technique helps you reprogram your mental response.

7. Self-talk

What it is: The language you use when talking to yourself directly influences how you feel.

How it works: Replace negative or catastrophic thoughts with positive, rational affirmations. For example, instead of "I'll never make it," you can say, "I have all the necessary skills, and I can learn along the way." This change in language reduces fear and increases self-confidence.

8. Relaxation and controlled breathing exercise

What it is: In NLP, controlled breathing is used to combat physiological responses associated with fear, such as increased heart rate and muscle tension.

How it works: When you feel fear affecting your body, stop and focus on deep, calm, and controlled breathing. This technique helps to relax the body and calm the mind.

Of course, the techniques described above work at the individual level. But, as I said before, we are currently facing an exacerbation of the feeling of fear at a collective level and even an exaggerated manifestation of self-defense practices, which materializes in social isolation, lack of communication and even enmity with others.

In this case, the solution would be innovative education, i.e. the inclusion of neurolinguistic systems in parenting practices but also in psycho-pedagogical ones. How can we do that?

Each of us can intervene when the child cries and cannot control his fear of water, for example. We can teach him to control his breathing, then

give him a very pleasant experience in a small amount of water and with many favorite toys. In this way, we create a positive experience, which we can later "exploit" in the pool or in the aquatic environment.

How do we intervene in education? Neurolinguistic communication is the solution. There are children who are afraid of failure, children who communicate with difficulty or children with learning problems. It is clear that in these cases, traditional methods have sometimes been insufficient.

For example, fear of failure can block a person's potential and affect their confidence and productivity. NLP proposes a series of techniques that help change the way we perceive failure, transform limiting thinking and create a positive and proactive mindset: reframing, by approaching failure in an easier note, rewriting the inner dialogue, that is, replacing statements about failure with positive affirmations, for example "I do my best and I will learn from any result."

Of course, we can also intervene at other levels of society, not only in the case of learning. For example, collective fear and the feeling of an unhealthy society and diabolical manipulation practices can be combated through social programs that develop individuals' trust in the administration, combating fake news, correct and complete information and developing critical thinking of individuals. And... We are going back to education...

Conclusions

As we have seen from the article above, fear is a behavioral model based on beliefs and mental programs that can be managed and modified.

The redrawing of the behavioral model is possible with the help of neurolinguistic methods, so that even a state as frightening as fear can be controlled.

At the societal level, we can intervene in order to cancel the transmission of wrong behavioral models that induce fear of failure or maladaptation, and at the individual level, each of us can adapt our own perceptions and parenting style.

Bibliography

1. www.dexonline.ro
2. www.hallo.ro
3. www.minteforte.ro
4. Kafka F., *The Trial*, Polirom Publishing House, 2019
5. Orwell G. (2022). 1984, Litera, Bucharest, 2021
6. O'Connor, Joseph, *Manual de NLP*, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2019, p.225

