

Fear Effect

By: Lynn Marie Helvey Photo: Becca Ewing

I was afraid of the boogie man as a kid. In my mind he looked like the Michelin man with boogers stuck all over him. I was afraid to go outside at night for fear he was just a few steps behind.

Halloween is a great time to think about fear. The spooky images that once terrified us now seem harmless, but that doesn't mean we're out of the woods.

What is fear anyway and how does it contribute to living? To get a grip on the subject, I spoke to Dr. Catherine M. Pittman, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Saint Mary's

College and co-author of

"Extinguishing Anxiety: Whole Brain Strategies to Relieve Fear and Stress" (with Elizabeth M. Karle and published by Foliadeux Press).

According to Pittman, we all experience fear. "Of all the human emotions, fear is universal, and the one emotion we understand the best."

She goes on to explain "Our brains are programmed to acquire fears. We share this trait with all animals, even fish. This has served us well; the cautious have survived. Therefore, our

brain has developed in a way that has prepared us to create new fears. Fear is our legacy," she said.

This is how she breaks it down: "There is a part of our brain called the amygdala (pronounced aa-mig-da-la). This is where fear is created. When an experience is paired with a negative outcome, our amygdala sets off an alarm which we call fear."

In other words, if you are in a car accident, you might later be afraid of driving. Driving a car + injury = fear. That's just how our brain works.

Apparently, in addition to connecting emotional meaning to things, the amygdala makes its own memories. In this way our fears can be triggered by a smell, location or event that may be completely unrelated to any actual danger.

Back to the car accident example. If, during the accident you happened to smell, say, popcorn. You might later find yourself avoiding the movie theater altogether. You may not even know why. How many times have you heard

yourself say "I feel scared for no good reason." Your amygdala probably knows.

Getting rid of fear isn't easy. According to Pittman, the best way to overcome fear is by facing it. "Repeated and prolonged exposure to that which scares us is the best way to get rid of fear," she says.

For instance, if little Suzy is afraid of dogs, the best therapy is playing with Fido. Thus, bravery is born. "We feel mastery upon conquering fear and actually create new neuro-pathways in doing so," says Pittman.

What about anxiety? What's the difference between fear and anxiety? She told me there was no difference where emotion is concerned. The only difference is that fear is usually of something specific such as spiders or snakes. With anxiety, you may not be able to identify the cause. There goes that darn amygdala again!

Is there no hope? Are we doomed to go around feeling anxious, never knowing why?

Actually, there's plenty we can do. Besides facing our fears, there are other suggested methods that have proven to help.

Music is powerful. If we listen to calming music, our fears may abate. Breathing is another answer. Slowing down our breathing is a very good technique for dealing with anxiety. Relaxation is something we must cultivate if we want to live without fear. Another good weapon against the monster of anxiety is exercise. It turns out running around the block a few times can make a big difference.

So there you have it. Personally, I find a bit of relief in knowing I have some practical ways to deal with my fears. Being brave is something worthwhile to shoot for.

So, I guess as far as fear goes, a little may thrill, a lot may kill, but in the end it's all part of being human. **IN**