

## Ask Your Therapist

By Krishnabai, MSW, LICSW, the Ashby Center for Counseling

### Overcoming Fear

I was listening to the news on the radio today and the first hour was devoted to cyber terrorism and the second hour was about how the recession was affecting the finances of our colleges and Universities. I noticed that I was having the following reaction to the programs: at first I wanted to shut off the radio before the shows began, then I thought I should listen to the first few minutes to get the important headlines and then shut it off, then I got interested and engaged with the shows but part of me wanted to shut them off and be in the quiet for a while, and then I wound up listening to the whole show and feeling a bit anxious after hearing all they had to say, especially the cyber terrorism program. Did it help me or hurt me to find out that our power grid is vulnerable to a cyber terrorist attack? Probably both. Am I better off knowing about some potential attack over which I have no control or influence? Only if I know how to digest the information in ways that are useful to me.

There are three common reactions to fear: flight, fight and freeze. In flight we can physically leave or emotionally leave “space out” or “zone out” when we are presented with information which we feel unable or unwilling to face. When we fight we are acting out the belief that the best defense is a good offense. The adrenalin races in our blood stream and we punch, hit, kick, swear, etc. And we freeze when our emotional or nervous systems become overwhelmed with internal and external data or stimuli and our physical or mental system shuts down and we lose the ability to move, think, react, etc.

So what can we do to deal with fear more effectively? The most important thing you can do is to turn and face the fear, size it up and evaluate it for how realistic it actually is. For example, many of my female clients have a strong, deep secret fear they will become “bag ladies”. I think this is a left-over from the time when women did not work outside the home and they were financially dependent on men for their income. No man = no money = no home. So I ask them to look at their actual situation now. I ask them to figure out how they can live on the income they are making. While it is true that their lifestyle might become more basic, they see that they could survive on just their income and this is a big relief for them.

For people who fear early death I ask them if they wear their seat belts in the car, do they go for regular medical exams, do they practice safer sex methods, and ask about the other members of their family and their longevity. I ask them if they have a will and other papers in place. (I had to tell one client that not having her papers in order would not prevent her from dying if something deadly happened to her.) I ask them if they have a particular way or time of dying that they fear and

we talk about the possibility/probability of that happening. (Falling out of an airplane is highly unlikely, being struck by lightning is slightly more likely, being bit by a poisonous snake is likely but only if you live in an area where there are many poisonous snakes, another reason to live in New England!)

I do this because once people talk about what they are afraid of, some of the power of the fear is diminished just by talking. Sometimes we wind up laughing about our fears as our rational self is restored to prominence and our fearful self is relieved of the burden of our unspoken fears.

And as in many things I write about, if your best attempt to deal with this issue does not bring you peace and satisfaction, you may want to see a professional to help you sort out the things in your life that you fear.

To read all the prior Ask Your Therapist columns go to [www.krishnabai.com](http://www.krishnabai.com) where you can also send Krishnabai a general question for her column.

Krishnabai, MSW is a therapist in Ashby and Wellesley Hills where she sees adults, older teens and couples. The core of her work is the discovery and expression of the Authentic Self. She focuses on the identification, expression, and resolution of emotions, commitment to honesty and the use of remedial education and information. The Ashby Center for Counseling 978-827-1181.