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### “The Fear of the Unknown”

It is 10 o'clock at night and you have just finished watching TV down in your basement. You can feel yourself getting sleepy while sitting on the couch so you decide to call it a night. You turn off the TV, fold up the blankets that you were using, and now it is time for the worst part of the whole night; turning off the lights on your way back upstairs. It seems completely irrational, but the fear that there is someone, or something, lurking in the shadows just waiting for the lights to go off is a fear that I feel like many people can relate to, especially during childhood. Do we *actually* believe that there are murderers or monsters hiding in our basements? Maybe, but I doubt it. I think that the combination of our overactive imaginations, paired with the blank canvas that is darkness, tends to lead us into scaring ourselves by imagining all the things that *could* be hiding in the dark. This scenario is a perfect example of how certain fears, such as a fear of the dark, can be traced back to one fundamental fear, a fear of the unknown. But the question remains: Why do humans have such a profound fear of the unknown?

In order to understand the “why” behind fear, it is crucial that one understands what fear really is. According to Nicholas Carleton;

Fear is a basic, adaptive, protective response to a current, identifiable threat, accompanied by a strong physiological reaction enabling a fight or flight response. In contrast, anxiety is a more complex preparatory response comprising worry regarding a potential threat as

yet unidentified or unrealized accompanied by a similar...version of the physiological reaction to fear. (“Anxiety Sensitivity and Intolerance of Uncertainty”)

Here, Carleton explains the difference between what fear is and what anxiety is. He explains that fear is a reaction to a real, present threat, while anxiety is a similar reaction to *potential* threats or uncomfortable situations. In this example, Carleton explains how the two are different, however, it also highlights how similar they are. Both fear and anxiety produce similar physiological reactions. They both activate our fight-or-flight response, and according to mayoclinic.org, they can both produce symptoms such as, “Feeling nervous, restless or tense, having a sense of impending danger, panic or doom, having an increased heart rate, breathing rapidly (hyperventilation), etc” (“Anxiety Disorders - Symptoms and Causes”). The only difference between the two is that fear is a response to an actual, present stimulus. Anxiety on the other hand is a fear-like response to a threat or situation that is unidentified. When talking about the fear of the unknown, it is important to remember that, technically, it is not a fear, but rather anxiety. It is this anxiety that produces such visceral physical and psychological reactions when we are confronted with unpredictable situations. The reasoning behind why unpredictable and unfamiliar circumstances can cause such uneasiness in people is because of the fine line that they draw between actual fear and anxiety. Going back to the example of being afraid of the dark, imagine being placed into a pitch black room without any information about what else is in the room. It would be impossible to know for certain if there was any present threat in the room. However, since there is a possibility of danger, and since we have nothing to go off of, our brains will think of all the worst case scenarios and keep us in defense mode. Now, instead of the room being dark, what if the room was filled with snakes? Some people would still be absolutely horrified, but there are also people out there that adore snakes and other reptiles, and so the idea

of being locked in a room full of them does not seem so bad. This is where the issue of fundamentality comes to light.

It is no secret that certain fears hold more weight for different people. As I had just mentioned, some people fear snakes while others do not. Personally, I absolutely despise needles, but I know that some people are able to take injections and shots as if it were nothing. On the more extreme end of the spectrum, there are some incredibly strange phobias such as globophobia, which is an intense fear of balloons (“Fear of Balloons Phobia - Globophobia”). Now, I am quite certain that the vast majority of the population does not fear balloons, however there are people out there that do have this phobia. Another aspect to consider is the fact that many people that have more specific fears have usually developed them because of certain traumatic experiences (“Specific Phobias”, mayoclinic.org). People who have been in severe car accidents for example usually have some level of discomfort when they get into a car afterwards. The same principle applies to people who were victims of sexual assault, war veterans, survivors of other types of accidents, illnesses or tragedies, as well as people with specific, “unusual” phobias. So, how does one decide whether a certain fear should be considered fundamental or not? Well, psychologists are still debating on this topic today, however there are certain criteria that need to be fulfilled in order for a fear to be labeled as fundamental. In the most basic terms, for a fear to be considered fundamental, it needs to be able to explain other, more specific fears. For example, a fear of heights can be explained by the fear of death. The height poses a threat to one’s physical well-being and so it produces a feeling of fear. According to Nicholas Carleton and the studies that he had mentioned in his journal, the fear of death, along with the fear of pain, and the fear of the unknown, are the three most fundamental human fears (“Anxiety Sensitivity and Intolerance of Uncertainty”). These three fears can be used to explain basically all rational

fears that people have, however I believe that it could be argued that a fear of pain and a fear of death can both be subdivisions of the fear of the unknown as well. Pain is usually an unknown variable until someone is actually experiencing it. One can *imagine* how much something would hurt, like breaking a bone, but until someone is actually confronted with that pain, it remains unknown. Also, the fear of pain bleeds into the fear of death as it is common for people to expect death to be a painful experience. Adding on to that, death is arguably the ultimate unknown of our lives. There is absolutely no way of knowing what comes after death and, for a lot of people, that realization is terrifying. Therefore, I believe it is reasonable to conclude that both a fear of pain and of death can also be explained by the most fundamental fear of them all; a fear of the unknown.

The reality that this one, single fear could potentially explain all other fears became more and more apparent the further I got into my research. I had originally planned to conduct my research on the topic of thalassophobia which is a fear of the ocean, however, the more that I sat and pondered on that topic I realized that there seemed to be an underlying fear that can explain not only a fear of the ocean, but why we fear the things we do in general. In the case of thalassophobia, it not only refers to the fear of the vast expanse and depth of the ocean, but also to the fact that we know very little about the ocean as a whole. According to an article published by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “more than eighty percent of this vast, underwater realm remains unmapped, unobserved, and unexplored” (“How Much of the Ocean Have We Explored?”). Essentially, this means that we have only explored around a fifth of what the ocean has to offer. For reference, the surface of our planet is 71% water (Williams, “What Percent of Earth is Water?”), and humans have been around for roughly 200,000 years (“How Long Have Humans Been On Earth?”), yet we still know so little about the oceans, and the

creatures within it. In fact, we know more about Mars, a planet that no human has ever set foot on, than we do about the ocean floors on our own planet (Tani, "Understanding Oceans"). That is undoubtedly, and objectively, quite terrifying to think about. Another glaring example of how the fear of the unknown can explain other fears is with the previously mentioned fear of the dark. The uncertainty that darkness brings with it is what makes it so unsettling to us. The same procedure of backtracking can be done for all the other fears and phobias in order to figure out which fundamental fear is the driving force behind it, and from my experience, the fear of the unknown seems to be the most influential. Even specific fears that seem to have no connection to a fear of the unknown can be explained using this method. Going back to the fear of balloons, this fear seems to have no correlation to the unknown. Obviously, if someone is afraid of balloons then the threat or trigger is already identified; the balloon. However, rationally speaking, balloons do not pose a threat to humans, so where does this fear really come from? Well, as I briefly mentioned, specific fears and phobias are, unfortunately, often the result of specific traumatic experiences ("Specific Phobias", mayoclinic.org). Based on this knowledge, I think it is reasonable to say that the fear does not stem from the object or situation itself, but rather the traumatic experience that is associated with it. The fear is not rooted in the object or situation, but rather with the *uncertainty* that it represents. The uncertainty of one's safety and wellbeing. In my opinion, I think it is fascinating to think that all of these different fears and phobias that seemingly have nothing in common on the surface can be explained by just one specific fear.

The amount of influence that the unknown has on people does not stop there either. Although many people are not aware of it, the fear of the unknown is a constant influence in our daily lives. For example, when talking about death, humans have gone to incredible lengths to try

and comfort themselves with the reality that everyone will die and that no one knows what happens afterwards. According to Rush W. Dozier, Jr his book titled, *Fear Itself: The Origin and Nature of the Powerful Emotion that Shapes Our Lives and Our World*, humans have developed religion as a way to cope with the ultimate unknown of death. In chapter 6 of his book, Dozier goes on to say,

In trying to explain a universe in which we ultimately suffer and die, we have developed an elaborate spiritual life that seeks to give us a greater sense of mastery over our own destiny. This type of understanding lessens our sense of anxiety and helplessness. By providing insights into the purpose and meaning of life, religion gives us a sense of control over the fear of death and the unknown. (129)

In this example, Dozier beautifully explains how, since death is such a profound fear for many people, religion becomes a very desirable outlet for those people as well. He also states how religion is ultimately just a way for people to be able to feel like they have a sense of control over the many unknowns in their lives, most notably death. It is also important to note that although many religions are vastly different, all recognized religions have an interpretation of death and the afterlife (Filippo, “Religious Interpretations of Death, Afterlife & NDEs”). Death, and therefore the unknown, are a universal aspect of all religions. This puts into perspective just how much of an influence this fear holds. The fact that we have created thousands of different belief systems in order to try and comfort us about the ultimate unknown of death. The influence continues from there and bleeds into other aspects of people's lives, most commonly in social situations. The fear of being perceived negatively, the fear of not making a good first impression, the fear of speaking in public, among many others, are incredibly common and again, they showcase the fear of the unknown perfectly. When meeting someone new, the vast majority of

people will feel a sense of anxiety. But again, the anxiety comes up for people because of the uncertainty of how the other person may act or behave, whether they will judge them, and so on. This example of how uncertainty leads to anxiety can be found in so many different social situations. From going on a first date, to having a job interview, or even simply calling a doctor's office to schedule an appointment. In all of these situations, people feel the anxiety and fear that they do because of the unknown variables and outcomes that are associated with them. On the topic of anxiety, the fear of the unknown also plays a huge role with anxiety disorders. Like with fear, the aversion of the unknown can explain virtually all anxiety disorders, and this could have a tremendous impact in the diagnosis and treatment of these conditions. According to Inka Papenfuss and Brian D. Ostafin of the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, "A potential benefit of this approach is that hierarchical models can help to identify important treatment targets that, when treated, should reduce a range of related higher order symptoms" ("A Preliminary Comparison of Fundamental Fears Related to Anxiety"). Here, Papenfuss and Ostafin explain the possible benefits of a hierarchical model for fear and anxiety. Essentially, they state that if anxiety and fear are indeed a sort of pyramid, with the fear of the unknown at the very top, then focusing treatment and therapies at that specific fear would in turn have positive, "trickle-down" effects on all of the other fears and anxieties that can be explained by that one, single fear. This also means that, if a fear of the unknown underlies anxiety and anxiety disorders, therapies and treatments that focus on that aspect could theoretically be universal treatments for *all* anxiety disorders. It goes without saying that the possible benefits of this would be truly spectacular. Not only in the treatment of anxiety, but also with the possibility of using this same principle of hierarchy to dissect and explain other complex emotions such as depression or even anger. In the case of fear and anxiety, the unknown remains the most

fundamental aspect, but with other emotions, it may be completely different, however that is a topic for another time.

The influence that the unknown has on human beings is undeniable. From influencing our religions, to mediating our social interactions, to literally explaining every other possible fear, the fear of the unknown remains as the most fundamental. As I mentioned earlier, even the fear of death and the fear of pain, which were also considered fundamental, can be explained by the fear of the unknown. The answer as to why this one, specific fear holds so much weight is much simpler in theory than originally expected. Humans, at their very core, are simply just animals. The human brain, although it has developed significantly over the course of human history, still contains those primal survival instincts and mechanisms that all living things share. Life's sole purpose is to thrive and reproduce, therefore, any amount of uncertainty about the environment or its well being immediately sends it into defense mode. That is simply just how life has been programmed. Humans fear the unknown because the lack of vital information represents a possible threat, and like all other forms of life, humans ultimately just want to survive. Although the answer may be a bit simpler than expected, that does not make it any less interesting. The fact that something as complex as fear or anxiety can be explained by one basic fundamental fear, and that fear in general is just a natural survival mechanism is absolutely fascinating. My psychology professor, Robert Schilf, had once said in his class that, "out of all the things that you learn in this class, the most crucial skill to have is the ability to be curious." Now, that may not be completely verbatim, however, the message has stuck with me ever since. Curiosity is a necessity for society. The more curious someone is about themselves and the world around them, the more they can change the world for the better. In my case, researching and learning about fundamental fears and the fear of the unknown has provided me with a lot of perspective for my

own life. Knowing that unpredictability and uncertainty can have such a profound effect on people can help me be more prepared and mindful whenever I am presented with those types of situations, especially later on in life and throughout my career. At the end of the day, fear is an emotion that everyone will experience at some point in their lives and, although many people associate fear as a “negative” emotion, it is one that is absolutely necessary to our survival.

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