

The Art of Mental Training

Chapter 13

Controlling Fear

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One day he asked me about fear.

“Inside the eye of a cyclone, Danielsan, there is peace—while just outside, the cyclone unleashes all its fury and power. This is how it must be for the mental warrior also.”

I told him how I’d once been so aware of fear that I sensed how it could become overwhelming. During my aviation training in the Navy, I admit that I got to know the type of fear that near-drowning can bring on. I nearly drowned on a couple of occasions during training. The truth is, try as they might to keep it from happening, people die in that type of training program every year. It’s just the nature of the situation.

All the deep-water survival training is done wearing flight gear, including helmet and boots. You have to learn to avoid drowning despite everything that’s weighing you down and trying to pull you under. It can be exhausting. One day thanks to my lack of technique, I learned what the fear associated with believing you are going to drown felt like. I remember the dark green glaze of the water, my last grasped breath, the glimpse of a pale blue sky, and then my last thought as I went under:

I hope they noticed a helmet sinking . . .

The worst and scariest training sessions were called the helo-dunker. Imagine being strapped into a helicopter simulator with a co-pilot and four other crew. Once everyone is strapped in, the entire apparatus is dropped into a training tank of water from around twenty feet up. No one is allowed to move until the “aircraft” sinks down about twenty feet, where it is rotated on cables, turned over and up-ended in order to disorientate everyone. Once the movement stops, you have to count down from ten, after which all six on board have to find their way out of a specific hatch designated by the instructors just before the drop into the water. Everyone must do this wearing swim goggles that are blacked-out in order to make him completely blind. It’s an interesting situation that can easily lead to panic.

In order to get out safely of course, the trick is not to panic, release your safety harness, and never lose your reference point. One hand must always be grabbing some part of the aircraft as you work your way out. You never release the reference point you have until your other hand reaches out and grabs a new one. So even as you float upside down in total darkness, the one hold that you always have, gives your mind the reference point it needs, and by using your mind's eye, you are able to find your way to the required exit hatch.

One of my roommates had to be pulled out by rescue divers when he panicked and failed to get his harness to release. We nearly lost him. And, since he had failed, we all failed. Without hesitation, we were all immediately loaded up to try again. There was no time to dwell on his near-drowning experience; instead we were strapped back in again—and again—and again. Until we all got it right, until we all beat our fear of drowning.

"Those must have been very intense feelings." Leo-tai said. "After all, fear is a normal response to something dangerous or threatening. While many would say that fear is healthy, it is no good if fear seizes control, especially when we may have to save ourselves or save others. Fear can ruin our potential to perform."

"So how can you stop fear from seizing control?" I asked.

"Controlling fear involves two things: a choice and a strategy. The choice is whether we truly choose to confront the fear; and then the strategy is how we go forward, having made the choice to do so. Naturally in the Navy they made the choice for you and you were forced to confront your fears. They applied their strategy whether you guys liked it or not, and so pushed you beyond your fears."

Leo-tai looked me straight in the eyes.

"Fear can create tension, doubt, anxiety, loss of coordination, and loss of concentration. In the worst cases, fear can even begin effectively shutting down neuro-muscular connections! Someone who is afraid naturally tends to shift their focus on to what can go wrong, and when they do that, Danielsan, mistakes begin to happen — typically the very mistakes they are most fearful of making."

"I see what you're saying, how the thought of something going wrong can make it worse," I agreed.

"Fear can cause the warrior to focus on the negative. The fearful competitor can become over-cautious, and decide to 'play it safe'—instead of playing to win. Fear can turn a competitor from someone trying to win into someone trying not to lose. Once that confidence is gone, any advantage that the warrior may have had over his opponent begins to disappear."

"But how do you manage fear?"

Leo-tai smiled at my question. “Where is the fear? Fear happens inside your head, and thus it can be managed. A certain amount of fear energy is normal in competitive or dangerous situations. What’s important is to not let it grow out of control — and to know what to do in case it does. Remember this: a champion knows that fear is only as powerful as he lets it become. Fear of something in the future—or even in the past, for that matter—can also be a tremendously powerful experience. Therefore it is important and necessary to take back some of the power of the emotion. The Warrior/Champion does this by bringing himself back into the present moment, and the easiest way to do that, Danielsan, is to focus and watch your breathing. You must bring your breathing under control in order to ground yourself in the present.”

“You mean, make a decision to focus on your breathing?”

“Exactly. It’s a good place to start. You must focus and breathe in a controlled way. Watch your breathing. Control your breathing. Doing this has a calming effect; but more importantly, it brings you back into the present moment. Once you are back, once you have returned to the present you (or any warrior) must then face his fear.”

“Confront your fear.” I suggested.

“Indeed. Ask yourself what you are so afraid of. Confront it rationally. This you must do before you can face your fear down and set off to do what you have been able—so successfully—to do in training or at other times. Begin to recall how well you typically perform. Recall how much you love the sport, the competition, how well you do your job. Then you must decide to move ahead and embrace the challenge set before you despite any fear.”

It all sounded possible and even empowering, but I still had one question.

“How do I prevent the negative thoughts that help make me fearful?” I asked.

“Interrupt them,” he said, “The instant that you notice them. Replace them—drown them out—with positive self-talk and images. You must re-direct the energy of fear and channel it into self-confidence. This is one way that you can begin to transform the energy.”

He then rose. “There is only one energy prior to a confrontation or a major challenge; and the energy is telling you to get ready. If you feel the energy to be more like fear rather than self-confidence — remember that it is happening in your head. Against fear, Danielsan, you must have the spirit of attack, against fear, one can always win.”

Remember: Against fear, one can always win. Confront the fear and then engage a strategy to move forward despite the fear.

