

Fear and How I Should Respond to It

A Black Belt Thesis Written by Heather Flessing

If someone were to ask me what I was afraid of, I could easily list off a few things: spiders, public speaking, the disapproval of others, rejection, failure. At some point in my life, each one of these fears has influenced my behavior and mindset. Often times they have caused me to feel long periods of anxiety and stress. As the Roman philosopher Seneca said, "Where fear is, happiness is not" (ThinkExist.com, 2012), and I have found that to be quite true. One of my greatest fears, though, was the feeling of helplessness and an inability to protect myself if I was alone and was attacked.

How Can I Protect Myself?

Many times I would find myself working late and needing to walk from my classroom to the school office. It was not something I would look forward to, as my classroom was not very close to the office and I would need to walk in the dark for a bit by myself with no one else on campus to hear me if any problems were to arise. Because of this, I found that learning self-defense was necessary if I were ever going to free myself from this fear.

As I have practiced Kenpo, I have been able to feel less fear if I have to go somewhere by myself. Learning to be aware of my surroundings and recognize activities and people that might signal danger has allowed me to feel more at peace and less fearful. In his book *Infinite Insights into Kenpo: Mental Stimulation*, Mr. Parker (1982) talks about the need to be aware of your environment and identify and understand the types of dangers present in that environment. Being mindful of possible dangers will not rule out threats to my personal safety, but they can aid in my survival if an attack should occur.

I have also found that when I trust my intuition, I am able to be calmly alert instead of restlessly worried. As Gavin de Becker (1997) wrote in his book entitled *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence*, intuition is "always in response to something" and "always has your best interest at heart" (p. 70). Though I may not always interpret my intuition correctly, I can learn from my efforts to identify possible dangers around me. I can know that being overly anxious about every possibility or being complacent and lacking vigilance are both terrible ways to deal with my intuition. I must learn to trust any nagging feelings or hunches I may have and not always set them aside as unfounded fears. I must be prepared to react to whatever situation may arise instead of being worried that something *might* happen at any moment.

Furthermore, it will benefit me to remember Ed Parker's Ten Commandments of Prevention:

1. ACCEPT the fact that THERE ARE IMPENDING DANGERS.
2. CONSIDER the fact that DANGER CAN AND WILL HAPPEN TO YOU.
3. UNDERSTAND HOW DANGER STRIKES.
4. Create the DESIRE to want to do something about it.
5. Have the CONVICTION to commence studying to prevent it.
6. Develop the WILL POWER to complete the studying.
7. KEEP-UP with the studying.
8. Periodically RE-EXAMINE present as well as new dangers.
9. Make CAUTION the key to your endeavors.
10. AVOID unnecessary and/or suspicious activities where danger lurks. (p. 119)

If I make acceptance and awareness my focus instead of fear, I will act less like a victim and be more capable to defend myself should the need arise.

What Are the Effects of My Actions?

As I learned to defend myself, however, a new fear arose: the fear that my actions might result in another person's death. At our studio one of the books that is required reading for prospective black belts is *Deadly Karate Blows: The Medical Implications* by Brian C. Adams (1985). In the preface Adams writes that he wants a sense of responsibility to be developed in students as they come to realize the possibility of seriously injuring others. As I began reading, I had to stop after only 15 pages. In this book, Adams lists the possible effects of hitting someone with different kinds of karate attacks in various places on the body. Out of the 24 places he indicates that a person might be struck, 17 have a possibility of resulting in death. I became afraid that as I practiced with my partners in the studio or if I were to ever be attacked on the street, I might accidentally kill someone. It took me a month or two of talks with Dr. Smith and Mr. Shukla, two of my black belt mentors at the studio, and a bit of self-reflection to come to grips with killing someone being a real, though unlikely, possibility and something that I would have to deal with if I were to continue practicing martial arts.

The main idea I learned during my talks with my mentors that helped me overcome my fear of killing someone is that when I do self-defense techniques in the studio, I must practice self-control. Mr. Parker indicated that a trained martial artist should not pull a punch but should instead control a punch to within a fraction of an inch from a target. If I only go within inches, I should not have to say I'm sorry to anyone. I should not need to fear injuring or accidentally killing someone when I control where I hit them and how hard. That is all part of the responsibility that comes with being a practitioner of martial arts.

As I reflected on the possibility of killing someone who attacks me on the street, I had to think long and hard about what Captain Ron Sanchez taught at a seminar I attended. He said that it was important to already know how far you are willing to go to defend yourself and the people you love before you get into a situation where you have to do just that. If I hesitate and wonder if what I do will kill my attacker, I will most likely end up dead or seriously injured myself. As Mr. Parker said, "He who hesitates mediates in a horizontal position." Because of this, I have to come to terms with what I must do if I am attacked and not second-guess myself. I must know how far I am willing to go in order to make sure that I am not the one leaving the scene of the attack in a body bag. I must know the answers to questions such as these:

- Is there a way to get out of this situation without needing to engage my attacker?
- What kinds of defensive moves can I do to disable my opponent without killing him/her?
- At what point do I have to forsake the idea of just disabling my attacker and be willing to do whatever it takes to stop him/her from killing me?

What Is My Responsibility?

It was only after I took these ideas to heart that I could pick up *Deadly Karate Blows: The Medical Implications* and read the rest of it. After I finished the book, I truly began to understand the power and responsibility I have as a martial artist. Though I may not need to fear killing someone as the primary result of my actions, I do need to be aware that I could seriously injure someone. As I looked through the book at how many times a blow could result in death, I realized that there were many more ways that a person could be seriously injured by the variety of different strikes to the body. As I work with partners doing self-defense techniques or sparring, I need to practice self-control in order to ensure that I do not badly injure someone.

Even with self-control, though, there is a possibility that someone may get injured. As Mr. White says, “Karate is not checkers.” I must deal with the fact that injuries happen, and I cannot practice karate effectively if I am always afraid of hurting someone. Bruce Lee purported in his book *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (1975), “The mind must be wide open to function freely in thought. A limited mind cannot think freely” (p. 203). If my mind is occupied with thoughts of things that could go wrong when I practice sparring or self-defense techniques, I have no room left to think of what I should be doing to control my actions and prevent those things from becoming a reality.

What Place Does Fear Have Then?

After I finished *Deadly Karate Blows: The Medical Implications*, I read another book that changed my view of fear and its place in my life – a book that I have already mentioned and have found to be quite helpful. This book was *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence* by Gavin de Becker. In this book, de Becker argues that:

Far too many people are walking around in a constant state of vigilance, their intuition misinformed about what really poses danger. It needn't be so. When you honor accurate intuitive signals and evaluate them without denial... you need not be wary, for you will come to trust that you'll be notified if there is something worthy of your attention... Thus, trusting intuition is the exact opposite of living in fear. (p. 277)

I found that de Becker's argument made sense and that fear could be destructive if left unanswered. Caution and precaution can be worth far more to us than fear. “We are far more open to every signal when we don't focus on the expectations of specific signals” (p. 279). If I don't name specific events that I think could happen, I am much more open to all possibilities that may arise.

Furthermore, fear can ultimately lead to panic, and panic can be much more dangerous to us than the thing we fear. “Rock climbers and long-distance ocean swimmers will tell you it isn't the mountain or the water that kills – it is panic” (p. 279). When panic strikes, I have found that I am much more likely to freeze up or to do the complete opposite and over-react. If I instead calmly look at a situation and utilize my training and preparation, I am much more likely to respond in an appropriate manner to whatever may come my way.

How Should I Respond to Fear?

As I find myself in situations where I feel fear, I have to ask myself if there really is a reason I should be afraid or if my fear is unjustified. Do I need to be afraid of the spider crawling up

the wall by my bed? Probably not, unless it is a black widow. Do I need to fear the man walking toward me on the sidewalk? Probably not, unless it looks like he's trying to hide something behind his back or is looking at me in a menacing way.

In addition, I should readily claim God's promises from the Bible (*The Quest Study Bible – NIV*, 1994). Deuteronomy 31:6 says, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." Joshua 1:9 states a similar promise: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." Isaiah 41:13 continues that thought by saying, "For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you." By coupling my faith with my training and preparation, I will find myself ready to face whatever may come my way.

How Will This Help Me as a Black Belt?

To be a black belt means to be a teacher. I would like to instill in my students that it is important to pay attention to your intuition and not doubt your training. As I learn more about Kenpo, I find that it is important to not be afraid of fear. Without fear there cannot be courage. If there ever comes a time that my students or myself must use what we have learned through Kenpo, we must have courage to face that situation and not be afraid. We must remember that we have resources at our disposal to keep us from being victims and that those resources come with a responsibility to use them appropriately. I want my students to know that fear can be a powerful ally if used properly but that living in fear can cause more harm than good.

Having said all of this, as I continue in my training and in my teaching, I desire to transform myself into "a person who responds to the signals and is thus less likely victim" (de Becker, 1997, p. 66). As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world" (Proverbias.net, 2012). I do not want myself or others to be defeated by fear. I want it to be used only as a survival signal that draws attention to the presence of danger.

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