

# Ready to conquer your fear?

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Eleanor Roosevelt said, “Do one thing every day that scares you.”<sup>1</sup> She had a good thought. Doing scary things can help you. In many cases, you can overcome your fears by confronting them.

## Your brain on fear<sup>2</sup>

When you get scared, a part of your brain called the amygdala goes into action without your even having to think about it. Your amygdala releases chemicals that make you alert and ready for action. It stimulates your heart rate so more blood flows to your muscles. That way you're ready for “fight or flight”—the natural human fear reaction.

In case you need to protect yourself, your brain secretes a substance that blocks pain messages. It also makes you feel calmer to help avoid your being paralyzed by the fear.

After the threat has passed, your brain memorizes the whole chain of events. The next time you face a similar danger, the brain reacts even faster. You're even a little less afraid because your brain recognizes the situation.

## Outsmarting your brain

Thanks to an approach called Exposure and Response Prevention (or ERP)<sup>2</sup>, you can use your brain's response to beat your fear. How? ERP is based on the understanding that when you're exposed to your fear over and over (in a controlled way), your brain becomes wired to be less and less fearful.<sup>3</sup>

ERP can be very effective for people who have anxiety issues including PTSD — anxiety resulting from a traumatic event.<sup>3</sup> But it's not an easy or overnight process.

Here are some steps you can take if you want to try this method:

- 1. First, make a list of things that scare you.** Rank them from least to most scary. For instance, you may be afraid of the dark but even more afraid of embarrassing yourself in front of others. Put the scarier one at the top of the list.
  - 2. Choose one of your lesser fears and break it down.** Work on one step at a time. For example, if you're afraid of the dark, you would start by going into a room and dimming the lights slightly. Once you get used to that, dim them further. Stay with that until you feel comfortable. Then dim even more until you're in the dark. Repeat the steps again and again.
- Here's what happens: at each level of dimming, your brain is going through its fear reaction. By subjecting yourself to the fear over and over, you're training your brain to experience, learn and get desensitized to the fear a little bit at a time. You're using your own brainpower to overcome the fear.
- 3. Get support.** It's helpful to have a therapist, friend or someone else you trust to work with you.
  - 4. Practice, be patient and persistent.** Meeting your fears head-on takes courage. Applaud each accomplishment; be kind to yourself when you take a step backward. And keep trying.

<sup>1</sup>[www.brainyquote.com](http://www.brainyquote.com)

<sup>2</sup>[www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com)

<sup>3</sup>[www.nj-act.org](http://www.nj-act.org)