

# The Influence of Fear: From Franklin D. Roosevelt to Modern Neuroscience

By Jennifer Zach



Fear can paralyze a nation. Franklin D. Roosevelt inherited chaos when he was inaugurated as the 32nd president of the United States: the banking system had collapsed, unemployment had soared, and the economy had hit rock bottom—it was the Great Depression. Facing a national crisis, Roosevelt sought to reassure a fearful nation by proclaiming, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." His message aimed to shift the national mindset from despair to hope, encouraging Americans to recognize the pervasive power of fear and its ability to stop forward growth and further darken an already bleak situation.

The same psychological truths about fear apply today. Thanks to advances in neuroscience, psychology, and the social sciences, we now have a deeper understanding of fear and its effects on the mind and body (Porges, 2011). As Roosevelt implied, much of what we fear may not be life-threatening but rather perceived threats; these fears often amplify through the stories we tell ourselves (Porges, 2011). Understanding the nature of fear—both in Roosevelt's era and our own—can offer valuable insights into how we respond to adversity and how we can learn to navigate our fears more effectively.

## **The Biological Basis of Fear**

Fear is an essential survival mechanism embedded deep within our biology. It triggers the amygdala, a part of the brain responsible for activating the fight, flight, or freeze response, which helps prepare the body for survival by releasing stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol (Porges, 2023). Throughout human evolution, this response was crucial for escaping life-threatening situations, such as an encounter with a predator. However, this mechanism also activates in modern situations where the threat is often perceived.

Whether real or perceived, the release of stress hormones prepares the body for immediate action—raising heart rates, quickening breath, and tensing muscles. This heightened response is beneficial when dealing with actual threats. However, chronic activation of this response can lead to detrimental effects on health, such as increased anxiety, high blood pressure, and weakened immunity (Porges, 2023). While fear is necessary for survival, it can become harmful when sustained over long periods or triggered by non-life-threatening situations.

## **Real Versus Perceived Threats**

A key distinction exists between real and perceived threats. The amygdala, however, does not differentiate between the two. Its sole purpose is to keep us alive (Levine, 1997). Imagine mistaking a stick for a snake. While the threat response may initially help ensure survival, we have unnecessarily expended energy if the snake is, in fact, a stick. Similarly, when fear is triggered by perceived threats—such as fear of failure, rejection, or embarrassment—it can cloud our judgment and limit our ability to think critically (Levine, 1997).

As Roosevelt suggested, much of what we fear in everyday life does not stem from real dangers but perceived threats. Fear of uncertainty, for example, can drive individuals and organizations to act defensively, stifling creativity and strategic thinking (Brown, 2018). In today's fast-paced world, where complex challenges require innovative solutions, this kind of fear-induced paralysis can have significant consequences.

## Understanding Fear Through Modern Science

In 1994, Dr. Stephen W. Porges developed the Polyvagal Theory, offering a deeper understanding of how the human nervous system, specifically the vagus nerve, helps regulate emotional states, social engagement, and responses to fear (Porges, 1994). The vagus nerve, the body's longest cranial nerve, travels from the base of the brain through various organs, acting as a bi-directional communication superhighway (Porges, 2023). It plays a crucial role in either signaling safety, promoting calm and social connection, or triggering the fight-flight-freeze response in times of real or perceived threat (Porges, 2023).



Porges' theory explains how cues of safety such as a friendly face or calming environment can help settle the nervous system (Porges, 1994). On the other hand, signs of danger, whether real or perceived, can prepare the body for survival (Levine, 1997). This understanding helps explain why individuals feel stressed or anxious even in the absence of real threats. The modern world is filled with stimuli that may trigger this response, from social media to political uncertainty, making it harder to feel safe and connected.

### The Broader Impact of Fear

Fear not only affects our survival mechanisms but also impacts cognitive processes essential for success in today's knowledge-based economy. Decision-making, creativity, leadership, and social engagement all suffer when fear dominates. Roosevelt understood this on an instinctual level when he urged the American people to rise above their fears (Roosevelt, 1933). His speech helped spark a national movement, instilling hope and confidence in a country that desperately needed it.

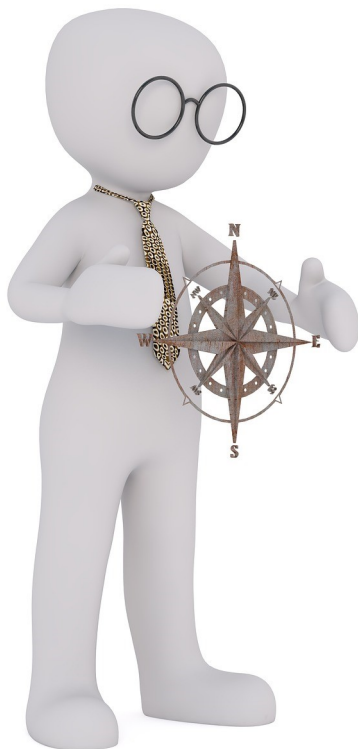
The pervasive nature of fear in our modern world underscores the importance of developing strategies to manage and mitigate its effects. Chronic fear, even when stemming from perceived rather than actual threats, can lead to short-term thinking, impulsive decision-making, and strained relationships (van der Kolk, 2014). Reducing fear responses, therefore, not only benefits individual well-being but also enhances creativity, problem-solving, and collaboration.

## Addressing Fear With The 3N Model

Modern mind-body practitioners recognize the detrimental effects of unchecked fear and offer valuable strategies for navigating fear. One such model is the 3N Model: Notice, Name, and Navigate, which helps individuals move through fear more effectively by increasing awareness of physiological and emotional responses to fear (Zach, 2023).

**Notice:** The first step in managing fear is to notice the physical sensations that accompany it. Whether it's a clenched jaw, tight shoulders, or rapid breathing, recognizing these bodily signals is essential. By noticing these cues, individuals can practice self-regulation techniques, such as deep breathing or mindfulness exercises, to calm the nervous system and prevent the stress response from escalating. This simple yet powerful step equips us with a practical tool to manage fear in our daily lives, enhancing our ability to stay calm and focused in challenging situations.

**Name:** Once the physical sensations of fear are noticed, the next step is to name the emotions and distinguish between real and perceived threats. Not all fears are equal, and naming the emotions helps individuals understand the difference between genuine danger and perceived threats. Naming emotions also helps develop emotional intelligence, enabling individuals to respond more thoughtfully and empathetically to challenging situations.



**Navigate:** Finally, navigating fear involves using self-regulation techniques to course-correct in real-time. This can be as simple as grounding oneself by focusing on a pleasant visual or sound, allowing the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for rational thinking—to stay engaged (Levine, 1997). By navigating fear effectively, individuals can remain calm, make thoughtful decisions, and avoid overreactions.

## **Fear As A Catalyst For Growth**

As Roosevelt recognized, fear has the potential to either paralyze or propel individuals forward. By understanding the biological and psychological aspects of fear, individuals can learn to leverage it for growth rather than letting it dominate their lives. When approached with the nervous system in mind, fear can drive individuals to higher levels of performance, preparation, and perseverance (Zach, 2023).

Modern practices such as mindfulness and meditation offer proactive ways to strengthen the prefrontal cortex, helping individuals manage fear responses before they escalate (Siegel, 2007). These practices also promote creativity and innovation—skills that are often compromised when fear is allowed to dominate.

### **Rising Above Fear**

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s assertion that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” remains as relevant today as it was in 1933. Fear is an inevitable part of the human experience, yet it need not control us. By understanding the biological underpinnings of fear, distinguishing between real and perceived threats, and using strategies like the 3N Model, individuals can navigate fear more effectively and leverage it for personal and professional growth. In an ever-changing world filled with uncertainty, developing resilience and emotional regulation skills is essential for long-term success. Just as Roosevelt inspired hope during the Great Depression, we, too, can rise above fear and move forward with courage, creativity, and confidence.

**Jennifer Zach** is the coach you want when the stakes are high. She is an ACC, a certified mind-body coach, integrative somatic trauma therapist, and founder of Zach Coaching, LLC. As the author of *Somatic Awareness: Leading with Body Intelligence*, she draws on her expertise as an author, speaker, and executive coach to empower clients to make clear-minded, intentional decisions. Jennifer is recognized in various publications and conferences, including *Choice Magazine*, ATD's ALC Conference, *TD Magazine*, *Training Magazine*, and the Iowa SHRM Conference. Jennifer has also been featured at *DisruptHR*, solidifying her reputation as a thought leader in leadership and somatic awareness.

#### **Photo Credits:**

AI Generated environment: vocablitz from Pixabay

Navigation: Peggy und Marco Lachmann-Anke from Pixabay

## References:

- Brown, B.** (2018). *Dare to lead: Brave work. Tough conversations. Whole hearts.* Random House.
- Levine, P. A.** (1997). *Waking the tiger: Healing trauma.* North Atlantic Books.
- Porges, S. W.** (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation.* W.W. Norton & Company.
- Porges, S. W.** (2023). *Our polyvagal world.* W.W. Norton & Company.
- Roosevelt, F. D.** (1933, March 4). *First inaugural address.* The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-addresses>
- Siegel, D. J.** (2007). *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being.* W. W. Norton & Company.
- van der Kolk, B. A.** (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma.* Penguin Books.
- Zach, J.** (2023) *Somatic awareness: Leading with body intelligence.* Self-published.

