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ONE QUESTION



What Are You Afraid Of?

The way you handle fear can make or break a relationship.

BY ROBERT MAURER, PH.D.

WHEN YOU ENTER into a new friendship, romance, or business partnership, you generally do so with excitement and hope. However, most people also fear disappointment or betrayal; being let down does happen. Indeed, the happiness of a new relationship can be dimmed by this very worry. So how do you mitigate the fear and increase relationship success?

I looked at various studies, each of which followed large groups for decades. The research sought to identify the skills that enable both individuals and couples to maintain lifelong success in work, health, and relationships.

In one study, researchers found that the critical element in predicting the long-term success of subjects' lives was the quality of their interpersonal

relationships. The research also revealed a key ingredient of successful relationships: How one handles fear. Take the child who wakes from a nightmare or hears terrifying sounds like claps of thunder. Without a day's training, he runs to his mother for reassurance, then falls back asleep in her arms. His response to fear is optimal.

We are not always so skilled in identifying our own fears or asking for the specific help we need. Nor are we experts in providing the most helpful support to others. Perhaps we are out of practice, or maybe we had little experience in receiving positive forms of support as a child.

at Rockefeller. I went to the chairman of the Queens College psychology department. He asked me one question: "What did you learn there?" What popped out of my mouth was, "I guess I learned that there's a lot that even Rockefeller scientists don't know, and even they make mistakes." "That's worth two semesters of A," he responded. That's how I completed my bachelor's degree.

After graduating, stirred by the civil rights movement, I ran rap (discussion) groups in a junior high school in a low-income neighborhood. Again I failed. I couldn't even control the kids. Again I quit in embarrassment.

I learned a valuable lesson: You can't solve everything, and it's key, after reasonable persistence, to move on to what you might do better.

LUCK MATTERS

I decided that the answer for me was more education. I applied to ten graduate programs in education and was rejected by most. But Berkeley not only accepted me, it extended to me a free ride plus a stipend and housing with a beautiful view.

Unlike the others, Berkeley had looked only at my final year's grades, which, because of the course credits accorded my work at Rockefeller, gave me a 4.0 GPA. I'd had only a 3.2 in my previous three years.

It takes humility to recognize that your successes are not all your own doing.

TOUGH TIMES

After completing my doctoral studies at Berkeley, with a 3.9 GPA and my dissertation nominated for dissertation of the year (it lost), I applied for 100 professorships. I didn't get one interview, only offers of temporary lectureships.

I was devastated. I concluded that the times were just too tough for me to break into academia.

ACT! NOW!

I refused to let myself wallow. I knew that the longer I did, the more likely I was to stay mired in self-pity. I immediately jumped into action so that I'd have new hope.

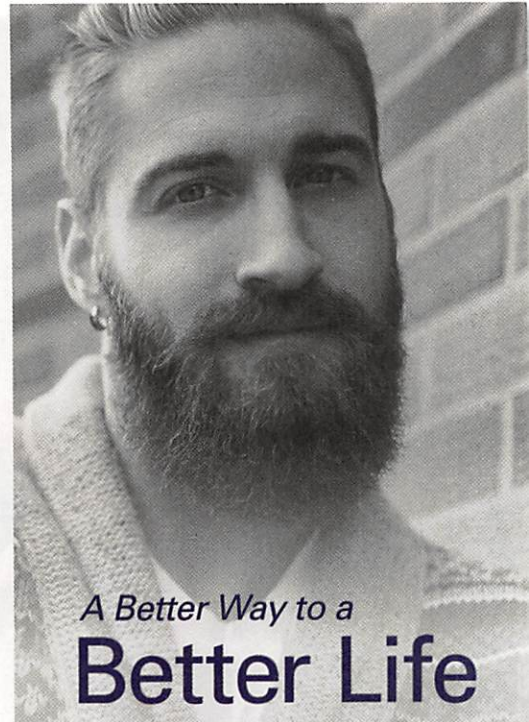
And I asked myself, "What do I most value?" My answer was simple: Work. It was work, not Holocaust remembrances, that had healed my father and most of the other Holocaust survivors I'd come to know.

It takes humility to realize that your successes are not all your own doing.

I decided I'd become a career coach and help people to find the work that's right for them, something they could succeed at and enjoy—without needing a personality transplant.

I have now been a career and personal coach for almost 30 years. I have served 5,000 clients and do not feel burned out at all. I love my work. My experiences have led me to believe that we are pretty much who we are. Throughout my life, my approach has been to accept people's basic nature. If I want to try to help people, I simply help them find work and relationships in which their natural self can best thrive.

Following a setback, some people feel a need to grieve, to process the loss. But that can be risky. It can sink you into the quicksand of self-pity and self-doubt rather than move you forward. Better to spring back into action to improve the odds of finding an even better option than the one you lost.



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Hence, we may not recognize—or be willing to acknowledge—our own or others' need for comfort. Moreover, we may not even believe that people are capable of providing this support. Also, those of us who value independence over interdependence might erroneously think that identifying our fears and asking for help is a sign of weakness.

It's important to overcome these concerns, because a related question can be predictive of relationship success:

What will a person do when he or she is afraid?

Relationships can become scary. For one, people are not as consistent as one would hope.

For another, a relationship may seem so good that you start fearing you will lose it. You may think, "This is wonderful!" But while you're planning dates, vacations, and a future together, other thoughts creep in: "What if he changes his mind?" "What if she decides she doesn't want me and leaves?" When such thoughts arise, it's worth going to that person and saying, "I got so scared today thinking of what life would be like if you went away." Because, one hopes, the person you've chosen has a good understanding of fear, she will hold you and say, "I know. I sometimes feel that too."

The same principles apply to any important new or ongoing relationship—in romance or friendship. When feeling the emotion of fear, you need to reach out for support and you should respond to others' fears with support. Does your prospective partner have this skill? Do you? Here are four questions to consider at the start of any new relationship:

• *Does your partner have close friends for help and support?*

- *When you ask for support, is he compassionate and caring?*
- *When you ask about her past mistakes, does she indicate that she turned to others for help?*
- *When you ask about his past successes, does he share the credit with others?*

These questions provide a good foundation for learning about how you, or others, might respond during times

Humans are inconsistent, and that scares us.

of fear. Relationships are most successful when all parties are able to ask for and provide the help that's needed.

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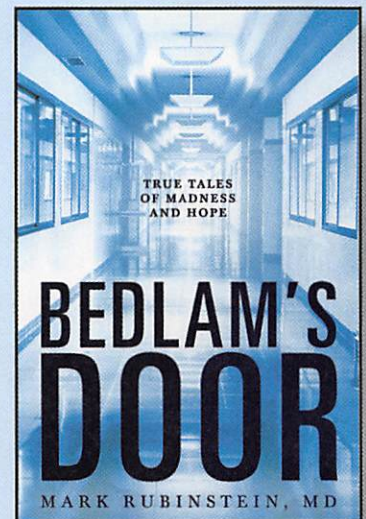
CALLING FEAR BY ITS NAME

Highly successful people view reaching for and receiving support as a strength. Also, successful people label fear by its name. They don't bother calling it *stress*, *anxiety*, or *nerves*. When we call fear *stress*, for example, we tend to blame situations and other people for our responses. This leads to feelings of helplessness and encourages us to complain rather than to act. Yet when we call fear by name, we are led to take action by actually addressing it.

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