

When Fear is Stopping You From Pursuing Meaningful Work

I was having a discussion with a friend recently who is holding himself back from doing the purposeful work he thinks he wants to pursue.

What's holding him back?

Fear of putting himself out there in public. Fear of failure. Fear of being judged. Fear of choosing the wrong path. Fear of not being good enough.

Do any of these fears sound familiar? They're very common, and hold a lot of people back from pushing themselves into the discomfort and uncertainty of meaningful work.

These fears cause us to procrastinate, distract ourselves, comfort ourselves with food and social media and shopping and games, avoid even thinking about it, and beat ourselves up for not doing anything.

If we could deal with these fears, we'd be rock stars.

I'd like to share a few techniques that will help, if you put them into practice.

Exposure Therapy: Don't Start at the Superbowl

Most people make the mistake of imagining themselves at the scariest part of the journey of their meaningful work — speaking in front of a huge crowd if you want to do public presentations, having an audience of hundreds of thousands of people if you want to write a blog or do a podcast, managing a huge team if you want to run a non-profit organization.

But that's like wanting to be a football player and starting at the Superbowl. You're not ready for that kind of pressure. Instead, start with youth football, high school football, and then college football before even considering the big leagues.

If you're an author, this means just write one blog post. No one will read it at first, so there's no pressure. Then write another.

If you want to do public speaking, just speak in front of a few friends. Then a group of 10 people. One small step at a time, and you'll get more and more prepared as you do each step.

This is known as "exposure therapy" — exposing you gradually to the thing you fear, starting with the least scary version of it. It is quite effective, and you can use it by structuring your progress gradually, starting very small.

Allow Yourself to Feel the Fear

This is where we bring in mindfulness — when you're feeling fear, instead of turning away from it or trying to escape/avoid it ... try turning towards it. Actually allow yourself to feel the fear. We don't often want to feel it, but we have a greater capacity to feel fear than we give ourselves credit for.

Try it: notice how the fear feels in your body. Not your story about it, but the actual physical sensations of the fear in your body. Allow yourself to stay with it, to be with it, to tell yourself that it's OK. Be friendly towards yourself and the feeling of fear, gentle, curious, open.

You will transform your relationship with it, even if it doesn't go away. In fact, you'll start to realize that you don't need to get rid of the fear, you don't need to do anything about it. It's not a problem, it's just a feeling, just an experience, just a part of the meaningful work you want to do.

Practice Dropping Your Ego

Fear comes up because we have a story about what might happen to us — for example, “If I try to write this book (or start this business), I'll fail, people will judge me, because I'm not good enough.” (The last part might not be vocalized but is underlying the story.) This is natural, and it's good to notice what our story is, to become more aware of it, and then to start to see its power over us.

Once we become more aware of the story, we can practice dropping it. And dropping the ego (self-centeredness) that is at the center of the story. How? By dropping into the present moment, becoming aware of the sensations of the body, the breath, the fear, and everything that surrounds you.

Dropping into the present moment, becoming fully immersed in what is happening right now, our ego drops away. The story about what might happen drops away. We can't think about both at the same time. So the story will come back (along with our self concern) and then we practice dropping everything again and being present. Arise and drop, over and over, until we get good at letting go and being here.

Being in the present, we can do the work. Take the next step. Not worry about ourselves, but instead take action for the sake of the people we most deeply want to serve.

Open, Open, Open to Joy

So we're taking small steps (exposing ourselves gradually to the fear), we're feeling the fear, we're dropping the ego and stepping into the present ... now from this place, we can practice opening.

What is practicing opening like? Imagine that you have to do the hard work to get your meaningful project started. You feel the fear and resistance, stay present with it, but open to the action of the task in front of you. You become fully present with the task, opening your mind and heart to it. You start to fully appreciate the beauty and joy of the task, opening yourself to this incredible experience, which might include discomfort, uncertainty, fear and resistance. All of it.

It's all mixed in with the joy and gratitude you feel for being here, now, with this task. Doing it for people you care about. It's fantastic, and you have the privilege of being able to do it.

If you'd like to dive deep into facing this fear, come practice with me in my Fearless Training Program. We're going to train in this together.