

Fear

When I was a kid, I was afraid of some very strange things. Believe it or not, I was terrified of spaghetti. Don't laugh, my brothers would chase me around the house with it. I was also petrified of broken dolls. I'm sure both of these fears were deeply rooted in some primal trauma that one of these days I should get hypnotized to reveal, but as a five-year-old, I didn't know why. I just knew that each of these fears was very real.

I don't even know how or when I got over these fears, but I did. I am not afraid of snakes, bugs or bees, heights, or the dark, or traveling to strange places alone.

So, I found myself wondering: what is fear? What exactly is it that frightens us? We each have a different answer, but many times, as with my childhood fears, we don't know why. It can be a tricky thing to try to take a fear apart to examine its elements. Is it fear? Or is it what we might euphemistically call "discomfort?"

Until recently, many of us grappled with fear that was unreasonable or abstract. Don't be afraid, we told ourselves... honestly, what do you have to be afraid of? It's what loving parents say to their children. I'm here. I'll protect you. As we grow older, we find ways to say this to ourselves. Don't be scared. Everything is going to be OK.

But things have changed, rapidly and dramatically: Many of us in recent weeks carry a fear that is universal, it is shared. This fear has little to do with the abstract and unrealistic fears of my childhood. This is new for us. We are afraid of things that are real, are close to us, and have touched many of us personally. And it seems as if we are all bound together by it. It's as if we are all holding on to the same rope.

I think that connection is important: the rope, and the fact that we are all holding on together right now for many of the same reasons.

I recently came across an interview with the clinical psychologist and author Jack Kornfield. In wondering what to do with this collective fear, Kornfield's answer seemed one that I can hang onto:

What's needed in a time like this are ways to steady the heart... The first step is acknowledgement and the willingness to be present. You could almost whisper to yourself, "Sadness, fear, anxiety, grief, longing," as if to bow to that feeling and hold it with respect. This allows the feeling to open – maybe even intensify for a bit – but eventually to soften. The next step is to bring in a sense of compassion for all the fears and confusion and helplessness. These feelings are all part of the fight-flight-fright-or-freeze instinct in the body and the mind. If I make space for the feelings and they have time to be felt, it's as if my awareness gets bigger and I can hold all of this with greater ease and compassion and presence and steadiness.