Love Is Medicine For Fear
Arthur Brooks, The Atlantic 7.16.20

We are living in a time of fear. According to the American Psychological Association's annual "Stress in America" survey, the percentage of people in the U.S. who say that "the future of our nation is a significant source of stress" rose to 83 percent in June 2020, up from 63 percent in 2017. [76% in 2025] Gallup found that the percentage of Americans who had experienced worry "during a lot of the day yesterday" rose from 36 percent to 45 percent from 2006 to 2018; similarly, feelings of stress rose from 46 percent to 55 percent. This matches my personal experience. In recent years, I have noticed, people have told me more and more that they are afraid.

People's fears vary widely. The pandemic aside, the answers I hear are all over the place, from leaders they don't trust, to environmental problems, to simply being able to support themselves and take care of their families. According to Chapman University's annual "Survey of American Fears," almost 74 percent of Americans in 2018 were afraid of corrupt government officials, nearly 62 percent were afraid of pollution in bodies of water, and 57 percent were afraid of not having enough money for the future. One way of dealing with these fears is to strive to eliminate the threats that caused them. But while social and economic progress is important and possible, there will always be threats to face and things to fear. The way to combat fear within ourselves is with its opposite emotion, which is not calmness, or even courage. It's love.

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote in the Tao Te Ching, "Through Love, one has no fear." More than 500 years later, Saint John the Apostle said the same thing: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." This is a very strong argument: Love neutralizes fear. It took about 2,000 years, but contemporary neurobiological evidence has revealed that Lao Tzu and Saint John were absolutely on the money.

Fear is a primary emotion processed in the amygdala, a part of the brain that detects threats and signals to the body to produce the stress hormones that make us ready for fight or flight. However, we have a natural modulator of the hyperactive amygdala: the neuropeptide oxytocin, sometimes called the "love molecule." Oxytocin is often produced in the brain in response to eye contact and touch, especially between loved ones. The feeling it creates is intensely pleasurable; indeed, life would be unbearable without it. Oxytocin has also been found to reduce anxiety and stress by inhibiting the response of the amygdala to outside stimuli. If you have loving contact with others, the outside world will seem less scary and threatening to you. What Saint John asserted is literally true: Perfect love drives out fear.

Our current fear problem is not due to a proliferation of threats. Despite all the troubles we face, as my Harvard colleague Steven Pinker has shown, the world of the 21st century is safer for the vast majority of us than the world of previous eras. The real issue is that we have too little love in our lives to protect us against our fears.

Americans are getting lonelier. Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has written a book about this, and the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration has declared a "loneliness epidemic," specifically citing "living alone, being unmarried … no participation in social groups,

fewer friends, and strained relationships" as the culprits. Clearly, a lack of relationships makes life's fears harder to cope with. It is especially notable that today's adolescents and young adults enjoy less romantic love than in the past. Research shows that young people are far less likely to date, marry, and have sex than in past generations. According to my own analysis, using the General Social Survey, the percentage of married 20-somethings fell from 32 percent to 19 percent between 1989 and 2016.

The math here is easy: More isolation plus more hostility equals less love; less love equals more fear. To reduce fear, we need to bring more love into our lives. If you're not sure how to get started, let me suggest the following approach, which starts pretty easy and advances in difficulty.

1. **Confess your fear to someone you trust**. Many people carry their fears stoically, never sharing them openly with others. Hidden fear often expresses itself obliquely and in unproductive ways, such as hostility or aloofness. It is also a missed opportunity: To confess fear, while scary in and of itself, is an act of vulnerability that stimulates the love you crave, in yourself and in the ones you allow to comfort you.

2. **Make your love overt**. Today, tell someone you love her or him. Not someone you would normally say that to, but rather to a friend or family member for whom this would not feel natural. The point here is to break a barrier of expression for yourself but in a way that is relatively safe. The more you say "I love you," the less strange or scary it will feel. It is a small act of courage. The payoff is not just more closeness, but also an increase in your fortitude, which you might need for the next step.

3. **Take a risk**. Confess your love or admiration for someone who doesn't know that you have these feelings. This requires particular courage in the case of romantic love, because the risk of personal rejection feels so high—and is even harder if you have no practice with this kind of rejection. It is a direct confrontation of fear with love. But even telling someone you'd like to be friends, or telling a co-worker you admire them, can feel risky, because the feeling could be unrequited. Do it anyway.

4. **Love your enemies**. This is perhaps the hardest piece of advice, in our polarized ideological climate. But it may also result in an enormous payoff to you personally as well as to the broader culture of contempt we have come to inhabit. Try resolving for a week not to attack anyone over differences of opinion, in person or on social media. Disagreement is fine, but try to have those conversations with understanding and kindness. I realize that this advice runs counter to today's culture. If you think someone is wrong, your instinct may be to hate more, to fight harder. But you can't insult anyone into agreement, and you probably have little or no real power to force others to do your will. Furthermore, antagonism, the opposite of an expression of love, will likely only make your fears worse.

What I'm suggesting isn't easy. Showing love in the face of fear isn't a natural reaction. Fear instinctively provokes fight or flight, not tenderness and affection. But remember: Instinct doesn't care if you are happy. You need to violate your instincts if you want to build a better, less fearful life. Walk toward your fear. Face it, feel it, and love courageously.