

5 Ways Fear Threatens Your Health

The title of this article may seem ironic to you. After all, it's doubtful the idea of fear threatening your health in five different ways is doing much to quiet the soul!

But nevertheless, I feel it necessary to shed some hard-hitting light on the health-stealing shadows of fear. After receiving this information—as unsettling as it may be—it's my prayer that we you will be motivated and better equipped to face each unpredictable day and unknowable night with steadfast faith and confidence in our Father's care for us.

Before His death, Jesus foretold about the end times that would signal His imminent return. Suffice it to say, the picture He painted is by no means rosy. On the contrary, a gray, grim dystopia is described as we read about the arrest, persecution and martyrdom of last-days believers. Corruption, violence and moral depravity will be even more widespread than they are today. News of war will make headlines every morning. Earthquakes and famine will occur more frequently and with an unthinkable intensity the world has never seen.

It doesn't matter whether you believe in a pre-, mid-, or post-tribulational rapture of the church—or no rapture at all. The fact remains that as the final return of Christ draws closer, the world grows more wicked.

With all the evil and hatred toward the truth of the gospel spreading like wildfire across the globe, our world has consequently become quite a frightening place to live. Recent tragedies such as the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012 remind us of the fragility and unpredictability of life. It would seem that just stepping out of our homes means taking a risk. Nowhere we

go is guaranteed to be 100 percent safe.

The scarier this world becomes, the more comfort promises like Psalm 91 (see below) bring to our souls. Those of us who have chosen to follow the Lord and accept Him as our refuge are supernaturally guarded from evil. (Feel free to let out a shout of praise God now—unless you're in public, in which case a soft, nondisruptive handclap is advised).

“If you make the Lord your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your home. For he will order his angels to protect you wherever you go” (Ps. 91:9-11, NLT).

According to *Psychology Today*, fear is a “vital response to physical and emotional danger—if we didn't feel it, we couldn't protect ourselves from legitimate threats.” Because it is a basic survival mechanism that signals our bodies to respond to danger, it is an essential part of keeping us safe. An example of this is what we call our “gut instinct,” that is, the inexplicable “sixth sense,” if you will, that alerts us to predators and shady situations. I'm sure you can recall a few instances in which your gut nudged you to flee from an environment that just didn't feel quite right.

But while fear does serve a positive role when it comes to protecting us and our families from harm, it can also incapacitate us if we constantly dwell on threats, whether real or imagined. Here are five ways in which chronic, fear-filled thoughts can negatively impact your health:

1. It can weaken your immune system. The stress hormone cortisol weakens your immune system, and for good reason. During periods of intense fear or stress, such as in situations when your “gut instinct” is warning you of a predator, cortisol is trying to help reduce inflammation by weakening some of the antibodies that can increase inflammation. The hormone also turns on natural immunity (the

ability to fight off problems immediately) and moves resources away from specific immunities (the ability to prevent diseases your body knows how to control).

However, cortisol is only helpful in short bursts. When you are constantly stressed out or fearful, your body is needing T-cells and white blood cells, and unfortunately cortisol continues to suppress them, thus weakening your immune system over time. Granted, you still need to be in contact with germs and bacteria to become ill, but once you do, the road to recovery will likely be longer due to a weakened immune system.

2. It can rapidly weaken your heart. Research on a condition called stress cardiomyopathy, nicknamed “broken-heart syndrome” by doctors, is a condition in which intense emotional or physical stress can cause rapid and severe heart muscle weakness. This condition, according to Hopkins Medicine, “can occur following a variety of emotional stressors such as grief (e.g. death of a loved one), fear, extreme anger, and surprise.”

Stress refers to the body’s response to things it perceives as abnormal, ranging from physical abnormalities, such as high body temperature, to emotional ones, such the sudden death of a loved one. When these abnormalities occur, the body produces various hormones and proteins, such as adrenaline and noradrenaline, which are meant to help cope with the stress, such as quickly running away to escape danger.

With stress cardiomyopathy, it’s believed that the heart muscle is overwhelmed by a major dose of adrenaline that is produced suddenly in response to stress. While the precise way in which adrenaline affects the heart is unknown, it appears that, whatever the mechanism, the effects of adrenaline on the heart in this syndrome are temporary and completely reversible. However, Hopkins Medicine warns that stress cardiomyopathy “can be life threatening in some cases. ... The

good news is that this condition improves very quickly, so if patients are under the care of physicians familiar with this syndrome, even the most critically ill tend to make a quick and complete recovery.”

3. It can cause gastrointestinal problems. Anxiety is a reaction to fear and stress that affects us physically through the amygdala, a brain region that governs many intense emotional responses. Neurotransmitters carry the impulse to the sympathetic nervous system, causing the heart and breathing rates to increase, muscles to tense, and blood flow to divert from the abdominal organs to the brain.

In the short term, fear, as we’ve seen, prepares us to confront crises by alerting our bodies to danger. But its impact can be counterproductive, causing light-headedness, nausea, diarrhea and frequent urination.

4. It can cause fatigue. Fear creates tension that blocks the flow of internal energy. Prolonged or intense feelings of fear lead to the inability to respond fluidly to life’s challenges. Tension and rigidity also consume massive amounts of energy through constant effort. As an illustration, try clenching your fist and forearm for a couple of minutes and observe how much effort and energy is spent and wasted. Now imagine holding even just 10 percent of that tension for days or weeks throughout your body. This type of holding leads to full-blown exhaustion.

5. It can cause depression. First John 4:18 reads, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment” (KJV). The Greek word for *torment* used here is *kolasi*, which can mean “punishment.” When we live in fear, we are punishing our bodies with a depressed spirit. Depression, then, can lead to heart disease, diabetes, obesity, mental decline, substance abuse, cancer, pain and suicide.

The above verse states succinctly that love is the remedy for fear. "Perfect love" will result in security and peace, even in the midst of our darkest hours. The Greek word for *perfect*, used in the above verse, is *teleioj*, which means "complete"; "completeness of full age, man, perfect." When I consider this definition, perfect love, it seems, is not only a *what*, but also a *Who*.

When we direct our hearts and minds toward the One who loved us enough to give Himself for us, we are promised that He will "take great delight in [us]," "quiet [us] with His love," and "rejoice over [us] with singing" (Zeph. 3:17). We are reminded of the love, protection, prosperity, wellness and joy that can flow only from the rivers of His grace. We are healed of our blindness toward His omniscience and supernatural power, as Elisha's servant was in the following Old Testament story.

Elisha the prophet's servant rose one morning to see that he and his master were completely surrounded by the army of their enemies. The servant was, in today's vernacular, freaking out a little! Then Elisha said these awesome words:

"Don't be afraid! ... For there are more on our side than on theirs!" (2 Kings 6:16, NLT).

Perhaps Elisha could detect from a blank expression on his servant's face that it would take more than an enthusiastic pep talk to quell his fear, because what happens next is absolutely astonishing:

"Then Elisha prayed, 'O Lord, open his eyes and let him see!' The Lord opened the young man's eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire" (v. 17).

You might find this hard to believe, but Elisha's servant didn't witness anything out of the ordinary. Though we cannot see the heavenly realm, its heroic heralds or shining

soldiers, we can rest assured that they are indeed all around us as they were in biblical days; God has commanded them to be so (Ps. 91:10)!

What relief rises within our souls as we take a deep breath in and know that there is Someone greater than our parents, the government, our spouse and our own intelligence protecting us from harm. There is Someone stronger than health foods, the gym and modern medicine protecting us from illness. There is Someone more reliable than alarm systems, self-defense, and German shepherds protecting us from evildoers. That "Someone" is the Lord of the angel armies, the One who shouts at clouds to make it rain, tells ocean waves where they're to stop, commands the dawn to awaken earth and conducts the stars in their nightly symphony!

Take shelter in the Most High today, and you will find comfort in His everlasting promises.

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