



What would we do if we weren't *afraid*...?

All our fears are different,
but they have one thing in
common: They prevent us
from living this precious life
to our fullest potential!

This booklet explores the 'fear factor' in our lives, its texture, its taste, its composition - and shows that what we're commonly feeling isn't actually fear, but anxiety. It also lists practical exercises that will daze, numb and eventually kill off anxiety, in a very gentle way (if you want to read about anxiety killers right now, simply jump to page 10 of this document).

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Why are we not doing the things we want to do? Why don't we just quit our jobs and go out there, follow our passion? Of course, it's the money. But it's not as easy as that. Many people actually have jobs which they don't enjoy but which are highly paid. And yes, these people *do* have the savings, they *do* have the cushion, the bolster, that would allow them to get started. Why don't they?

The answer: FEAR.

It seems fairly straight-forward but it's not. For years, I did not understand what prevented me from following my passion. Of course I somehow knew it was fear, but that didn't help much. They don't tell you how to deal with fear, or in such a general way that I never found it really helped, no matter which suggestions I tried to put into practice. I felt like a failure, admiring all these people online (to which extent are they real?) who seemed to be doing what they wanted to do, while my life just sucked.

I did have ideas of what I wanted to do, ridiculous ideas. But then there were the bills. I wanted to travel, but then there were duties at home, bins to put out, plants to water. And did I mention that my ideas were ridiculous? In fact, they were *as* ridiculous as the ideas and dreams of all these people who did make it work.

My ideas were ridiculous. As were theirs - but theirs worked!

But I didn't take this as an encouragement. I did not go away thinking 'ah brilliant, if they can do it, then surely I can, too'. No. That's not been my nature. The way I had been wired was this: They can make it work because they have abilities that I don't have. I don't know which ones, but somehow, at night, in their basement, they must work some kind of magic that allows them to just go ahead with it. Instead of encouragement, I took this as another hint that I was worth less than these people - was not the fact that I hadn't achieved what they had put into practice - seemingly effortlessly - proof enough?

For years, I have been wrestling with fear. Mostly, fear won. It kept me firmly down on the ground, in such an embarrassing way that in judo, it would have been total defeat. During the good times, I ignored fear. During the bad times, I tapped on the floor with my hand, shooting glances at the referee (there must be some kind of justice in this world, no?), begging 'please, fear, please let me go'.

I tried to ignore fear. But fear didn't ignore me.

Ignoring fear, not dealing with it, simply meant to keep on living my life in a fairly stable way - no major hiccups, events regularly rolling in like the waves, but never any tide. Because change, alas, is fear-inducing, and the last thing I wanted is add fear to my existing pile of it.

Imagine you're backpacking, and you know you've already got stuff worth 10kg in your bag, but then you go to that market in Bali, and you really, really love that statue. But you can't. What you carry is already too much for you.

Now there are two types of people. Rational 'me' decided that buying it was obviously out of the question: my load would be too heavy. Some others, and mostly the people I admired, adopted a different approach. They just dumped stuff they considered less important than the item they wanted. It's such a powerful lesson. When you actually watch how people travel you can observe all colourful rainbow variations of this. Some people, the people I admired, carried only what they needed, only what *served* them. They didn't carry fears, unless they served them.

Don't carry fears - unless they serve you.

I felt I had to examine which types of fears exist - and see where my own fears fit into the pattern. For the first time it occurred to me that maybe all that good advice I was extracting from the internet, the bottom of all knowledge, wasn't working for me because it did not apply to my fears in particular - not that I think my fears are special. I think that everyone's fears are special. So what I had to do was getting really close to my fears, feeling their pulse (yes, they're alive and kicking!).

For the first time I understood that **the ability to safely navigate our fears determines success. And it won't help to know how others are managing their fears – because they're not the same fears as ours.**

There are, of course, those fears that are helpful. They're incredibly practical for survival. People might be scared of jumping off skyscrapers, and gosh, they're right (there are adrenalin junkies who aren't and their relation to fear is the complete other end of the spectrum). Fear is a healthy and absolutely normal reaction of the body to a situation that is threatening and dangerous. It's your body telling you: hey, if you keep going now, this will end up badly!

I'd commonly call what I experienced 'fear' - but the more I thought about it, the more I had to label it differently. These weren't spikes, adrenalin rushes, reactions to a threatening situation. These were things that were present 24/7. No one, not even war journalists and aid workers are under threat around the clock, so certainly not me.

This was not fear, but anxiety. Fear is realising that the approaching car will hit you in about three seconds. Fear is knowing that you took a step off the path and you're close to sliding downhill, saying goodbye forever to your fellow hiking friends. Fear, in short, is life-threatening. It's practical and useful. It's not incapacitating.

But this is not the type of fear we're usually experiencing. Fear is a situation you're in now. Anxiety is worrying about the future. It's a non-targeted uneasiness, and it's something very personal. Worrying about the potential consequences of potential actions. Fear is a reflex, you're not thinking, the pulse shoots up, adrenalin rushes in. It's a healthy response of the body. Anxiety is caused by a more long-term situation, but the crucial thing is this: The body is reacting to how *you perceive* the situation. The body is not able to take a step back and think: 'hang on, this isn't actually that bad. No need for the pulse to go up, no need to bite nails and pull out hair'. No. It can't tell the difference between a threatening situation and a situation you are *perceiving* as threatening.

Fear is a natural response to something life-threatening.

What we call 'fear' is anxiety.

Now, think of how you tell your boss that this job just isn't for you (can't bear the thought of quitting, but also can't bear the job anymore? That's called *decision anxiety* which is so common that psychologists created this term). Think of how you quit, with little savings, how for the foreseeable future you only pick pasta and tomato sauce from the supermarket shelf, how you hold on because it's your dream - and then how you finally give up, trying to get back into the 'normal, regular' job market. Just that it's too late. Recruiters will laugh at you. It will look like you've been doing nothing for the past years, no work experience, no job, not for you, not anymore. Are you stressed now?

This is a scenario many people who want to follow their dreams and are being held back by. These fears are constantly running through their heads. They discuss their dream with friends in cafés, over countless lattes, and write page after page in their diaries. Then they go back to their 'real' job. They 'get real', as surely some of their friends tell them.

But looking more closely at this scenario, I believe there are several layers of fears working together, aggravating each other. It's not as simple as fearing lack of money and lack of security. That's the obvious stuff and anyone following their dream has to deal with it (unless your dream is being a bank manager, but even that's changed with the financial crisis).

The layers at work and the constant currents rushing through anyone's head are some (or all) of these:

- **The fear of deciding.** Chances are, if we work in a corporation we have a boss who tells us what to do most of the time. Or if (s)he doesn't, our job is outlined in a detailed job description. You just know what are your duties and goals in your role. You would always seek permission before starting a big project or making any large-scale changes. But if you want to set up your own thing, follow your own dream, no one will give you permission. But the good thing is: you only need permission from one person - and that's *yourself*.

- **The fear of taking the wrong decision.** What if you shut the doors you may need later to enter the job market through? What if you alienate people you may need later? What if [insert here]? Truth is - you won't know. But not deciding allows external forces to drive your life forward, which means it's still your life, but somehow to a lesser degree. You could own it all! And if you're the more rational type: Strategists say that a good plan put into action today (and possibly improved/amended later) is heaps better than the perfect plan you put into practice years later. So take that leap of faith!
- **The fear of speaking up, speaking your mind.** Feeling entitled to tell your boss what you think, and that this isn't for you. We're told to like and be good at our job. We want to be likeable and be liked. But by behaving like this, we break the rules. - The great things often happen off the beaten path and are created by people who twist or amend the rules - or who simply create new rules.
- **The fear of appearing egoistical.** You're not thinking of the company but just of yourself, you egomaniac. - As the boss, you'd imply the same, trying to keep the employee on board. Take this as a good sign (better than relief on his face when you quit, right?), it means you have a lot of skills your company relies on; these might come in handy for your own professional future.
- **The fear of change.** What if the things we've got aren't great, at least not most of the time, but work out just fine? They pay the bills. It's not ideal, but it surely could be worse. It's good to *know* what you've got, rather than *potentially* getting something better. - This approach means you're doing one thing: You're filling the next pages of your book by copying and pasting the pages you've already turned. Or you take the pen and start writing a new chapter. Now, what's more appealing?
- **The fear of lack of security.** You started out because you wanted freedom, right? But to be free and to a certain extent self-reliant regarding your professional future requires vigilance, moral energy and ruthless self-

observation and assessment of your weaknesses. You won't be able to lean back into the comfortable armchair of habit. It provides security, but at the expense of freedom. Security is like aphrodisiac, it's so tempting, and it feels good short-term. In the long run, it prevents you from testing yourself, putting yourself out there, risk something. It puts your personal growth to sleep. Feel blessed that you've noticed this!

- **The fear of being unemployed.** Being self-employed at the beginning will feel very similar to being unemployed. Not that you don't have work, but it won't be paid work. You're no-one because you work for free. You've dropped out of the recognition system that is the modern office world of paid jobs. Just think of what you are going to say at that party when people ask: So, what do you DO? You can of course say: I follow my dreams. But that only works in a less formal setting, if you're under 25 or if you live in California.
- **The fear of being worthless.** If nobody pays for your work, your work is worthless. You are worthless. What you have to offer is not what anyone would want; and if your idea had been bright, someone else would have already figured it out. There's a reason why no one's doing it - because it doesn't work. - Having spotted a market gap is an *awesome* starting position. Leverage this as long as you can, others will copy you shortly. And it's easier than doing what hundreds of others are doing - but be better at it.
- **The fear of losing your status.** Your status symbols will become unaffordable. At the checkouts in your local grocery store they will see what you buy, and that it's the cheapest. Your neighbours will see that you sell your car. - If you're concerned by status, think this over.
- **The fear of letting others down.** You have a responsibility towards others, such as children, your partner. Heck, what if everyone was just doing what they wanted? It's not possible, and anyway, let's not think about it, we've got more urgent things to do. We're the provider for a family. We need to lead by

example so that our kids understand right now and right here that they don't need to bother studying history of art. Economics will do just fine. - This is fear disguised as rationalism. *Living a life that perpetuates the stereotype that 'making a living' is the goal is not only normal, it's insane.*

- **The fear of relying on others.** Yes, your partner will pay the bills. You're strong, independent, but you can't cover gas for this month. And that's fine. Surely you're able to give back something, be it love, attention, or simply fixing a fabulous dinner from time to time. And your partner also gets to spend time with someone following their passion. This doesn't happen often!
- **The fear of being different.** Different from others, sticking out, drawing attention to yourself. People's first reaction will be that you're crazy, or irresponsible, depending on how much they dare criticising. This is envy disguised as good advice. They're envious because someone from their corner has dared trying. They're not envious of the Queen of England. She's too remote. but they'll be envious of you. Be prepared to let go of some people while adding new ones to your circles (remember, the backpack?).
- **The fear of not making it because of gender bias.** Yes, there are some industries where women need to work harder to get accepted. This is a tough one, particularly if you believe that the world is a dangerous place for women who somehow are more fragile than men. But if you're constantly on the lookout for things that might hinder you, it takes a lot from the energy that's needed for creativity, strength and self-confidence. You'll use energy to build fences for protection - but these very fences will also prevent your from daring!
- **The fear of the job market being a closed shell.** Yes, there's pearls inside, but not for you, not anymore. Not with that gap (gasp) on your CV. - Truth is: Any employer will highly value the effort, dedication and willpower it took to see your project through, start your

company, stay motivated without any boss breathing in your neck. It failed? Fine. You have the strength to get up and look for work, right here and now. How's that for a character trait?

- **And finally: THE FEAR OF BEING SUCCESSFUL.**

That last one is a strange one, but many people get stuck there. They have a great idea, they evaluated the market, they've got the savings, they love what they'd be doing - but they won't. It's a weird thought but I truly believe that sometimes *we're just too scared to find out that our true potential is miles beyond our normal range of motion.* **Too scared to find out that we could have done so many more things, so many years ago.** To find out that we are truly powerful, and that now we have to *forgive* ourselves for not using the potential we've been given.

But we're lazy. We forget. We think we have all the time in the world. We think: 'Let's think about this later'.

But we're also powerful if we give ourselves the means. We are strong if we allow ourselves to be strong.

Everything will be easier than the initial decision. Taking the first step is the most difficult thing to do!

Anxiety killers that really work!

Here are a few things you can do to manage and (eventually) treat anxiety, and as a yoga teacher I'm thrilled to see that modern science seconds what yogis knew for thousands of years:

“By reducing perceived stress and anxiety, yoga appears to modulate stress response systems. This, in turn, decreases physiological arousal — for example, reducing the heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and easing respiration. There is also evidence that yoga practices help increase heart rate variability, an indicator of the body's ability to respond to stress more flexibly.”

(Read the full Harvard Medical School article on ‘Yoga for Anxiety and Depression’ [here](#).)

- ♦ **Meditation.** It's true. Nothing calms the mind more. Think you don't have the time and patience? Try five minutes every day. It will work, guaranteed. Also bear in mind this wise Buddhist saying: If you have time, meditate 20 minutes a day. If you don't have time, meditate one hour.
- ♦ **Breathing.** You are reading this which proves that you're breathing. But this is different. Granted, it takes some practice, but try *alternate nostril breathing*, or *anuloma viloma*, for the Sanskrit buffs. Do it 5 minutes every day - it's the secret yogic weapon against anxiety. You've never felt that centred in your life!
- ♦ **Managing negative thoughts.** The theory put forward by yogis is simple, and now even scientists think it's a valid one: Thoughts are moving energy, and watching your thoughts arise is the most effective management of anxiety. By preventing a negative thought from becoming repetitive, by preventing it from arising repeatedly, we cut its lifeline. We don't allow it to become a thinking pattern, and by that we also don't allow it to take root, implement itself in our character

as a pattern of behaviour. Positive thinking does affect your physical body, just as forcing yourself to smile actually *does* put you in a better mood. So fake it until you make it - think positive thoughts until you really *become* that person who thinks positive thoughts!

The 'fake it 'till you make it' approach can actually propel you forward in many ways. If like me, you are scared by your dreams and plans, try this: Don't allow yourself to think of the consequences - close your eyes and simply jump. If you're a coward like me, just put yourself in a position where there's no going back, where the only way is forward. Trick yourself with this other self, the one that lives the dream. For a moment, let passion rule. For now, forget self-preservation.

Some personal stuff...

After many years of sitting down and laboriously taking apart all the pieces constituting my fear, or rather: anxiety, I realised what prevented me from doing what I wanted: My feminist side. But what could be more liberating than doing what you want to do? Well - see, no regular job, no regular income, no independence. I had seen previous generations of women struggle with weighing in when it came to crucial (financial) decisions, had seen them devoting their lives to the upbringing of their children, leaving office jobs and then struggle returning to work. I am not judging this and right decisions for some are wrong decisions for others. But I know now that the fear of losing a constant income, no: losing that income being a woman, fuelled my fear. I strongly believed I could not follow my passion, have a family *and make it all work*.

No one ever told me this would be the case. *It was me who decided this should be true*. And that's been the most powerful lesson: Don't make up truths about the world - go out there, see and try. And then shape your world according to *your* truths. So that you won't ever ask yourself: *Where have all the years gone?*

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