

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN FEAR, FAMINE, AND FINANCES

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Money troubles can tap into the most

primitive emotions, including intense fear, and even reactions of flight and panic. But there are ways of using these signals, so we don't get lost in them.

Matt wakes up in the middle of the night, anxious and troubled. Breathing shallow and high in his chest, thoughts racing... The severity of his financial troubles has just hit him. His investments have dropped significantly, and his spending has been putting him deeply into debt surprisingly quickly.

At least it *feels* like it was quickly. The habits had been established some years earlier, but he hadn't modified his spending in relation to the real income he could draw from. For many months the trouble had been building, but credit created a buffer that allowed him to avoid feeling it.

Then one morning, at 3 am, it hits him. He's in trouble, big trouble. So big that he couldn't see a way to solve the problem. Panicked and overwhelmed, he soothes himself with a positive fantasy of things turning out okay. This calms him enough to get back to sleep.

When he wakes up, he's forgotten the urgency, and dives into his day. The soothing fantasy providing a reprieve from the anxiety. Until another week passes, and he wakes up again in a panic...

In this case, the panic is Matt's friend; his own awareness trying to break through his defenses so he can face the real problems. And there are ways of solving these problems. But nothing happens until he's willing to acknowledge the reality first.

Why is this panic around money so severe?

Remember that money is a medium of exchange, a means of storing and standardizing wealth. It holds in abstract form the concrete stuff of survival— food, clothing, shelter. But the mortal danger of losing those things were a regular part of life for our ancestors.

Our security today is in the form of our investments and savings; for our ancestors it was abundant game to follow, or a portion of seed for the next season's planting. Those things were often unpredictable for them.

So when we feel the panic of money troubles, we're also feeling the echoes of a more desperate past.

For our hunter gatherer forebears, the risk of starvation was a continual threat. But after the agricultural revolution there were still often crop failures and famines.

Pre-modern Europe endured famines every few decades. In France at the beginning of the 18th century the typical diet was as desperate as Rwanda's in 1965, the most malnourished nation for that year.

Today it's not uncommon when we've gone without lunch or breakfast to say lightly, "I'm starving!." But what we're experiencing is nothing like starving for real.

Famine and the mass starvation that it brings is a horrible, nightmare scenario, that was commonplace for our ancestors up to a few centuries ago, and still significant up to a few decades ago. It happens still in some parts of the world, but at a much lower rate than ever before.

When we feel afraid of going broke, or losing our home, the intensity makes sense, because it mirrors to some extent that primal and common fear of starvation.

But we can also feel that fear when we suffer a significant investment loss, or aren't sure how we're going to make all the payments this month, or we see our credit card debt inching up.

So what can we do about this?

We begin by acknowledging what's true – especially if we don't want to. To master anything, we must look at reality. Comforting fantasies can soothe us in the moment, but they can also undermine our motivation and ability to do the problem solving and work that it takes to succeed through our troubles.

Part of what's true, of course, is our own subjective experience of the fear. Usually that means that our breathing is high and maybe shallow in our chest.

Deliberately slowing and deepening our breathing more into our belly and lower back— using our diaphragm — for a couple of minutes can sometimes shift this significantly. The more we can focus on our physical sensations, the easier it is to come into the present, and then orient to the rest of what's true.

When we're calm enough — we don't need to be completely serene — then we can look at the figures. What do we owe to whom, what are the payments, what is our current and expected income, what are our expenses, what's the state of our investments.

And, perhaps most important: what are our strengths? What resources do we have to draw from? Who do we know that may be able to help us sort things out? Friends, family, investment advisors, business advisors, accountants, lenders... And physical resources: savings, possessions... anything we can convert into money if we need to.

Then we can get to work problem solving.

Start by defining the most positive outcome you could achieve from your current situation. Being debt free? Having a lifestyle where your income is greater than your costs? Having investments that you feel happy with? Imagine how you'll feel when you've reached this outcome. Then write it down in a few words.

But don't stay there. You don't want to enjoy the fantasy of it as an escape. You're defining your goals, and it's essential to move quickly to the next step:

Now think about what it is that prevents you from making this outcome into reality. What is the primary obstacle that keeps you from reaching this goal.

Think about this, really explore and make sure you've found the most significant obstacle right now. You'll know it because you'll probably feel energized, you may even get a flash of insight into what's been causing you trouble.

Maybe your lifestyle is fundamentally too expensive. Are there a few essential expenses that you could, if you really had to, do without? Is your mortgage more than you can afford? Car payments? Grocery bills?

Whatever it is, identify it, and let that be the beginning of your plan to overcome that obstacle. Once you have a clear sense of the obstacle, create an if-then solution for it, where "if" is the obstacle, and "then" is the action to overcome it.

"If I want to buy something with my credit card, then I'll stop and ask myself if this is something I need, or something that I want. If it's something I want, I won't buy it."

Then continue identifying other obstacles as you go, finding solutions for each.

As you go through this process, which Gabriele Oettinger calls WOOP: Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan, you'll be much more likely to move through those obstacles, solve the problems, and reach your goals.

Then the key will be to establish the habits over time that keep you at a good, safe distance from that dreadful fear of famine that our ancestors often lived for real.

If you're feeling any of this, it's essential that you move into serious problem solving. We can do all the meditation, calming exercises, or other anxiety interventions; we can soothe ourselves with hopeful fantasies; but if we're not actually solving the problems that are generating this primal fear, we're going to feel it, strongly, often when we're at our most vulnerable.

Look for the earlier, quieter emotional signals. The mild anxiety, the sense of disquiet and the urge to find relief in positive fantasies – without doing anything to overcome the challenges.

The sooner you can catch the signals that something's wrong, the sooner you can get to work solving the problems – and the less likely you'll be facing the echoes of our ancestor's deepest fears.

PS: My course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And now you can purchase the workbook for this course separately for \$29.95 plus shipping. You can still get the online course with the downloadable workbook at a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

Joel F. Wade, Ph.D., is the author of The Virtue of Happiness, Mastering Happiness, his new course, Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions, A Master's Course in Happiness, and The Mastering Happiness Podcast . He is a marriage and family therapist and life coach who works with people around the world via phone and video. You can get a FREE Learning Optimism E-Course if you sign up at his website, www.drjoelwade.com.

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