

Reader, beware—you're in for a delightful scare: Fear has a good side.



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Phobophobia, as the name suggests, is the fear of phobias, or the fear of fear. People with phobophobia tend to avoid anything that might be scary, like horror movies, roller coasters or school presentations. For them, fear itself becomes the monster lurking in the shadows.

But fear doesn't have to be a bad thing. In fact, being willing to be scared now and then—in relatively safe situations—can make wonderful opportunities for personal and social growth.

What scares me may, or may not, scare you. And fear responses are different for all of us and throughout our lives. Think back to when you were little. Does what scared you then scare you now? If not, why? Well, you probably overcame that fear by confronting it.

For instance, were you afraid of the dark as a tyke? Maybe you still are. After all, darkness can up the spookiness of any situation—that is, until you turn on the lights only to find a pile of unfolded laundry instead of the oogie-boogie man. As we age, we learn to reason through our fears, which, in this case, allows us to eventually ditch the night-light.

Coming into contact with something we fear can allow us to deal with the scary, on our terms, and when we're ready. By doing so, we can learn to understand our fears. Next time you feel scared, stop and ask: Why? What is it? What's happening right now? And, is my fear working for or against me in this moment?

Pushing ourselves in healthy ways like this can allow us to, ultimately, better connect with and understand different kinds of people and ideas.

Nonetheless, while approaching our fears can be a good thing, it's equally important for us to respect our fear responses. There's still power and growth in learning that you don't like something and that you don't want to deal with it. Some of us may never like insects, and that is OK. —Rachel Bittner

Thanks to Margee Kerr, a PhD sociologist and lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh, for helping us confront fear. Kerr has written books exploring fear and pain; and, believe it or not, she is a nationally recognized expert on haunted houses.