

SPOOKED. Stuck with the Spooks.

What is Fear?

Humans have an automatic physical response to fear called the fight flight reflex. It gets switched on when you think you are in danger. You do not actually have to be in danger, the fight flight reflex obeys your brain. If you think you are in danger, off it goes.

This reflex puts you on red alert. It shifts your body into top gear, so you will be ready to run away and save yourself if you need to. Your heart rate goes up, your rate of breathing increases, your palms sweat, and you feel awful. Agitated and tense. There is a lot of adrenaline in your bloodstream, a hormone which activates the release of sugar into the blood. You are all ready to go - all because your mind has read "danger". If there isn't any danger, you have a problem. What do you do with all this red alert?

People do all kinds of things with the fight flight reflex. Mostly they try and get rid of it, anyway they can. Many people have little idea of what it is and do not understand how it works.

The human emergency reflex tends to run it's own course. Once there are raised levels of adrenaline in the bloodstream, there is not much one can do about it *except relax*, which of course, is the last thing people tend to do. The discomfort of the emergency reflex is more likely to trigger more fear as the emergency reflex can be so distressing in itself. Psychologists treat a variety of anxiety conditions in adulthood which involve the emergency reflex. As an example, adults in restaurants and theatres suddenly feel anxious, sometimes closed in as in claustrophobia, sometimes frightened of saying and doing silly things, sometimes just frightened. This is a good example of the emergency reflex being triggered by the mind. Often there is a scary thought just preceding the anxiety.

Children are prone to the same emergency experience. Adults have a hard enough time coping. Children perhaps even more so. Learning scary feelings then, is unfortunately pretty easy for humans. Once we are alarmed in a particular situation, the alarm bells ring loud enough to remind us each time we come into that situation we are in danger. If the alarm bells go off at an inappropriate time, we are stuck with fear when we really do not need it - and this can be a lot of the time.

Having had the emergency response start up in the middle of the night, or once when we were too far from mother or father, kids tend to remember this and worry about these times. The anxiety about these feared times makes the whole situation worse and of course more likely to trigger other emergency experiences.

Adults have difficulty tolerating the discomfort of the fight flight reflex. Children have even more difficulty, and will almost always try and avoid the situation which gives them this experience.

Avoidance and Fear

Avoidance is *the* classic way of making fears worse. Whether in an adult or a child, avoidance is a favourite way of getting away from the discomfort of fears, even though in the end it also makes the fears stronger and stronger.

In agoraphobia, for instance, the fears which set in are avoided by not leaving the home. The affected person manages their uncontrollable fight flight reflex by avoiding the situations which trigger it. Getting into this habit can mean that any anxiety is managed by avoidance, until too much of the person's quality of life is lost.

To cure agoraphobia, as in the cure of any phobia, the avoidance must be replaced by exposure to the feared situation *in such a way* that the affected person can relearn a *tolerance* and then a mastery of the fear. The person learns to control the fight flight reflex and get their life back.

Stuck With the Spooks

When children start to avoid fears they get stuck with the Spooks. How do parents know if their child is stuck with the Spooks? Parents usually know!

The child keeps getting the same Awful Feeling about a particular situation, can't control it and begins to try to avoid the situation. Children trying to avoid the feared situations can get *very* persuasive. Parents quickly get to the point where they know exactly how the child is going to respond when they see a spider, go to the toilet, go to bed, say goodbye at kinder or school.

Getting stuck with the Spooks is:

1. Feeling Fear
2. Avoiding Fear
3. Having Fear in control

Night Time Spooks

A child frightened at night when he is in bed alone will experience the fight flight reflex every time he hears a noise or thinks he hears a noise. He will find these feelings very hard to tolerate. When someone comes into the room, his alarm subsides and he feels better - he successfully avoids his Awful Feelings by getting someone to come and sit with him or sleep beside him. As he learns that this works he demands to do it this way, until he cannot even think about sleeping on his own without feeling the fight flight reflex. He is stuck with the Spooks.

What Children Do to Parents

When children get the Spooks, they have a big impact on their parents. Children with the Spooks are in the grip of one of the strongest feelings known to humans - *FEAR*. Fear is an unsettling and contagious feeling. Children pass their fear to parents easily, and parents pass their fears to children easily. Sharing fears builds fear.

When the child's fears start off fear and anxiety in the parent, this makes avoidance more likely to work, as a Spooked parent will want to avoid the fears as well, and this makes it more likely that the child will get stuck with the Spooks. All adults have certain fears of their own, which they manage OK most of the time. Children can get these fears going in their parents, and make dormant fears active.

Mia

I was talking to a woman one day about her young daughter Mia who had been taken to several psychologists because she had a bad case of the Spooks. Mia was frightened of being away from her mother and frightened of sleeping in her bed at night. I suggested to this mother that Mia believed that the world was a scary place, and that she was constantly in danger. Her mother asked what she could do

about this. I replied that maybe she could tell Mia that the world was safe for her at night. Instantly the mother replied "I couldn't tell her that! The world is not safe!". As I talked to this woman she told me that her parents had been in concentration camps in the second world war, and she had old and dormant fears about safety and security which Mia had awakened. Mia's childish view of the world had triggered off fear in her mother. Now they were both stuck with the Spooks.

Adults do get concerned about the safety of their children. There are always risks. Knowing about risks does not cause the Spooks. What causes the Spooks is the feeling of *certainty* that something scary is going to happen. Children with the Spooks aren't telling their parents about *risks*. They tell their parents that something awful *is* going to happen to them if the spider stays in the room, the light is turned out or if they have to sleep in their own bed. Mia and her mother were both acting as if it was not safe for Mia to sleep in her own bed.

It is not all that hard to make people frightened. When your own child is frightened, it is easy to catch the fright. Parents who are catching the Spooks from children are fairly easy to spot. They do one of the things which follow.

Parents Who Catch the Spooks Do...

One of these things.

1. The first thing is try to talk the child out of the Fear. There are many ways of doing this. None of them work. This is a very different thing from helping the child *tolerate* the Fear. A parent catching the Spooks might say:

There is nothing to worry about so for heaven's sake just go to sleep.

That is a perfectly harmless spider and it's about time you learned to go to the toilet yourself.

I really don't know why you are so silly. Your sister (brother, cousin, best friend) isn't scared. See?

Mummy (daddy) needs to get some sleep and there is nothing to be frightened of. You know there aren't any bad people who can get in so you can go to sleep.

This mixture of reassurance (there is nothing to be frightened about) and occasional frustration does not help the Spooks. Sometimes adults can use reason and logic to help with the way they feel, but children are not as good at this as adults. Parents can tell children there are no risks, but children are unlikely to be able to use this as well as an adult could to control their fear.

2. Another thing which parents catching the Spooks sometimes do is to try to use some kind of *behaviour modification program*, which are sometimes known as star charts and sometimes known as bribery. In this case parents give the child a star for staying in bed, going to the toilet on their own, letting parents go home when the child is dropped at kinder, etc. The process is hit and miss. If the child has a very mild case of the Spooks, it may work. But what usually goes wrong is that the parent does not realise how hard a time the child has in tolerating the fear and sets the target for the child too high. The child may not manage it at all. Or more commonly the child makes a superhuman effort for a short while then gives up. Then the parent also gives up as the technique "doesn't work".

3. Parents catching the Spooks frequently lose their tempers. This happens because the parents themselves are uncomfortable with the strong fear in the child. If the child's fears stir up dormant fears in

the parent, parents can suddenly snap and scream at the child. Fear is a very disturbing feeling. It can take over parents as well as children. The problem is not so much that the parent has lost their temper, but that they have lost their temper over the child's fear. Parents do occasionally lose their tempers with children, and more often than not, no harm is done. *But* if the child is already Spooked, the angry parent, out of control of their own feelings, does not help.

Anger is a first cousin of fear. This can be seen in adult behaviour. Adults who are frightened often suddenly switch to anger. Take the example of a parent waiting for their newly licensed adolescent to come home in the early hours of the morning. They worry all night, gnaw their fingernails and imagine the worst, and when their child walks in the door, let fly with rage. I was talking to a father and son some years ago, and the man would habitually yell abuse at his son. One day his son broke down into tears and asked his father why it was he did not love him. The father looked astounded. He replied:

Of course I love you: I yell at you because I love you and I worry all the time that when you are grown up you won't have a job and won't be happy. That's why I yell at you.

Anger is often a cover over Fear.

4. Sometimes parents catching the Spooks find themselves unable to do anything except those things the child's Fears tell them to do. Parents do everything they can to stop the child feeling upset. This can extend to sleeping with the child all the time, not taking the child to the doctor when they are ill, avoiding dental or medical procedures, feeding the child with lollies every time they cry or experience discomfort, letting children sleep on the sofa and getting into bed with them until they fall asleep and if they wake at night, and in general *decreasing* the child's tolerance of strong emotions by assisting the child avoid all fear.

There are ways to manage the Spooks, but not these ways.