

SPOOKED: The PreSpooks, or Spooks in the Closet

Every family has a few Spooks in the closet - things that get parents rather Feely about things. Before we get to ways of managing the Spooks, it's important for parents to think about the Spooks in their closet.

Felicity and Sally

Felicity was a nervous mother. She had a nervous daughter, six year old Sally. Sally didn't like to go anywhere without her mother. She was frightened to leave Felicity at the school gate. Felicity had to ask a teacher to come and help her each morning with her daughter so she could leave to go home. Sally didn't like her mother going out at night. She was frightened even with her father. Felicity and her husband had not been out to dinner since Felicity was born. Felicity was sure Sally couldn't cope with a babysitter. So was Sally.

I asked Felicity about her experiences of scary feelings when she was young. She told me with pride that her mother had taken such good care of her that she did not have any. Felicity's mother had never had her children minded by anyone. When Felicity had gone to school, her mother would drive past the schoolyard every lunch and recess to make sure Felicity knew mother was still there.

Felicity was proud of her mother's care, and no doubt her mother cared very much for her children. But this is not the point. What Felicity had not realised was that her own mother had been unable to tolerate scary feelings. This difficulty has nothing to do with love. Felicity's mother no doubt loved Felicity very much. But she also had a lot of trouble tolerating scary feelings and in the end had let them take over her thinking and actions. Felicity's mother had feelings in charge of thinking. Felicity was doing the same thing. And now Sally was the same.

Felicity and her mother did what most people do when they get scary feelings. They tried to *avoid them*, by immediately doing those things the fears suggested. Felicity's mother had gone to the school to check on her daughter, and she never did get a babysitter. Felicity was doing the same kind of thing. She did the one thing which is known to make scary feelings return time after time - she *reinforced* the scary feeling by avoiding the feared situation, such as getting her children minded. She let the scary feeling take control and did whatever it suggested. Trying to avoid nasty feelings by acting on the fear makes one feel better for a short time, but whenever the fear comes back, you find yourself having to do these things all over again. Eventually the scary feelings are in charge and your life revolves around them. What has happened is that in the attempt to avoid the unpleasant experience of fear, you have given up control of your actions to the scary feelings and cannot tolerate the fear at all. Mysteriously, the fear has got bigger and bigger with every attempt to avoid it.

Felicity and her daughter now had the same fear - the fear of being apart from each other. Felicity was afraid of leaving Sally and Sally was afraid of being away from mother.

Learning Scary Feelings.

It's not surprising that scary feelings are so easy to learn. Think of the scary moments you have had in your life. Maybe there has been a time you stepped in front of a moving car when you were young, or the time a large dog rushed at you and bit you. Or a time when someone broke into a house in your street. These things do tend to stay in the mind.

This is because the instant fight flight reflex which occurs in fear also helps set the event in our memories. Normally we remember dangerous and scary events.

Also, if mum and dad act like there is danger, children reason there must be danger. It all rather depends, however, on whether mum and dad have learned some scary feelings themselves. Felicity, above, had learned to be scared if she ever had a babysitter, or if her children were at school. She had learned these scary feelings from her mother, and her daughter was learning them from her. But there was no actual

danger.

Children can learn specific fears from parents, such as in Sally's case above, or they can learn a tendency towards fear, as in the case of Tim, below.

Tim

Tim was frightened of spiders. He had seen a scary spider movie, and from then things seem to have gone from bad to worse. He was frightened of seeing a spider at school and demanded that every spider no matter how tiny, was taken out of the house. Tim's mum and dad, who both came with Tim to see me, were very anxious adults. Tim's paternal grandfather had been anxious, and often worried about his children's health. Tim's maternal grandmother had been a bit the same, constantly worrying that her children were safe and frightened that they may be abducted or run over on the roads. Tim's parents had generally low tolerance of scary feelings. It was not as if either of them were frightened of spiders. They were not. But they were frightened of *fear* itself. They worried. Constantly. When Tim worried, they worried that he was worried. When he developed his spider phobia, they worried about that. They thought it might be the sign of something worse. Was he going to be schizophrenic? Depressed? Why had it happened?

I discussed the problem with Tim, who was 8. Without his parents. He told me he thought the movie about spiders had stayed on his mind. I told him about the emergency response and suggested that he begin a *desensitisation* program with me to increase his tolerance of fear, although with an 8 year old I did not put it quite this way. He agreed, and then he did it. The method we used will be described in the next chapter. But the important thing to note here is that Tim gained a greater tolerance for scary feelings. And in doing so, the family Spooks, that is his parent's tendency to low tolerance for scary feelings, did not affect him so much.

Spooks in the closet, then, do not have to be specific fears. Sometimes they are, and sometimes it is just low tolerance of any scary feelings.

This low tolerance of scary feelings I call the Prespooks. When parents have low tolerance of scary feelings in general, the child is more likely to suddenly develop fears. Spooks in the closet are more a matter of the parent carrying a specific fear.

Penny

Penny was 13. Her mother, Sue brought her to see me as she had not slept in her own bed routinely for six years. As Penny grew older, Sue became increasingly aware that her daughter's fears were encroaching on Penny's life, but did not know what to do. Penny was beginning to react overly strongly to any anxiety. Sue was an affectionate mother, and told me that she had tried to help her daughter, tried to be firm and kind, but nothing had worked.

Penny had particularly acute fears. Long years of avoiding her fears had decreased her tolerance significantly. She demanded that her mother sit by her bed all night. So each night, Sue would try to convince Penny to sleep in her own bed. Penny would become hysterical, Sue would sit with her, sometimes all night, sometimes sleeping on the bed.

Checking for Spooks in the closet, I asked Sue about her own experiences of scary feelings. Her father had been violent, often physically violent towards her mother. Sue was the eldest sibling and had often attempted to intervene and been hit herself. This had gone on periodically, mostly at night, until Sue had left home at 17. Penny's fears and upset at night were triggering mixed memories in Sue and making her very uncomfortable. She was unable to leave her daughter if her daughter was scared, and her daughter

had lost tolerance for her fears and could not be happy. Thus the bind went on, and Penny and Sue were both miserable at night. Even though they were fond of each other, they often got angry when they were tired and scared, and the whole relationship was under strain. The Spook contract used by Penny and Sue will be described in the following chapter.

So Spooks in the closet, and the Prespooks, are important. In planning to make any change in your children's fears and the way that they manage these, it is very important that you and your partner sit down and have a good look at any Spooks in your own closet. You will not be able to make any change in the way your children tolerate fear unless your own tolerance of fear and sadness is adequate. You will find some more about this in the following chapters, but if the suggestions in the following chapters do not help your child tolerate scary feelings better, it is very likely the Spooks in your closet are not fully understood. If this is the case, you should seek professional help. *If the suggestions in the next chapters do not produce a significant increase in your child's tolerance of fear within three weeks, then they will not succeed, and the family needs professional attention to achieve this.*