Anatomy of Emotion: FEAR

Moving from Fear to Excitement through Embodied Presence

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For the PSEN US Training Program

• Fear is often the hardest emotion to access in one’s personal process.

• Fear is often the hardest emotion to tolerate in one’s body.

When holding the self together doesn’t work, one leaves the body via holding, freezing, dissociating or fragmenting.

When we become afraid...

• We make poor contact with the environment; there is no experience of another being there with and for the self.

• We will experience the environment as generally threatening, actively hostile or destructively collapsing.

• Our bodies lose a capacity to respond, to act, to move. All the energy of the defense system goes into ‘protect’ mode, into ‘holding together’ the body, which can be experienced as a frozenness.

When fear is the central issue in one’s personal work, there is the chronically repeated experience that the other does not notice:

• I am in trouble
• I am in terror
• I am lost
• I am unable to be responsive to my surroundings

When we chronically experience that the other doesn’t notice us in our fear, and we place all of our energy into holding ourselves together, we lose our capacity to turn towards and rely on the other.

• The fundamental task in process facilitation for the emotion of fear is learning how to gradually experience the environment as responsive, competent, reliable, active and alive.

Fear ------------------------------- Trust

Protect ------------------------------ Venture

When we experience fear in a healthy way:

• We are able to take our selves and our bodies to someone.

• We develop receptivity to our fear, both from ourselves and from another.

• We develop responsiveness to others when afraid - we are able to take in the support, hold onto supportive resources (sometimes literally); we experience the other as being there with us in our fear.

There is a feeling that although I am experiencing something I cannot handle by myself, someone can be there to do it for me at first, or with me, in the end.

What to remember when working with someone in fear:

• There has to be a change in the environment for that person, as well as within the internal makeup of the client.

• Fear surfaces at the edge of any developmental transition, as the environment is always not yet known.

• It evokes the experience of disorganization in the face of unfamiliarity, which must be tolerated, lingered with, and stabilized - in order to have an internal re-organization take place.
Crucial elements for a successful "developmental transition":

- Time, space and patience – ideally, giving someone as much as is needed.
- Having some sense of familiar ground still be there, while also moving towards unfamiliar territory.
- Take the necessary time to rest and restore. Allow for the ‘plateau’ periods, which provide the space for integration of what is now known (or new) that wasn’t before.
- Practice asking for guidance and support from others, creating a sense of shared participation or “we-ness”, without needing or allowing the other to take over.
- Give permission to make mistakes – talk about the inevitability of them – and how it is important to make mistakes in the right direction, towards one’s development.
- Allow someone to be available who affirms, appreciates, enjoys our interior world, whatever the struggle happening inside.
- Witness and reflect another’s growing sense of mastery, and affirm it.

Fear defenses in our culture are the most “ego-dystonic”, and thus they are the most rejected – fragmentation just looks ‘weird’ – dissociative, crazy, psychotic, etc.

We tend to place punitive ‘insanity’ labels on what we don’t readily understand. (Such as severe schizoid defenses.)

Insanity can be simply and practically stated as not having enough people who can withstand us, and understand us.

We need permission to hold on to the familiarity of our defenses while we are still working on something new. All sustainable change is most often gradual.

We need to recognize and embrace the underlying depth and pervasiveness of someone’s defensive fear, and understand the function it serves in their integrity as a human being.

People who are deeply afraid may look like they don’t care; they can get perceived as anti-social. We must see the terror and paralysis underneath external behaviors and postures.
Terrified people often truly don’t know how to interact, and need coached and encouraged.

Protocol for working through the recognition of a ‘self-threatening’ fear:

- To know and feel that I am scared to death (self acknowledgement)
- To have another important to me know I am afraid, and to be acknowledged and acceptance by the other when I am afraid.
- To be able to feel the feeling of fear as tolerable!
- To cultivate a willingness to revisit or approach again feelings of fear, with do-able repetitions.

The key element for anyone who is genuinely threatened or frightened is to experience the environment as acting with them, and not just for them!

We may need to act on behalf of our clients at first, but only until they can act on behalf of themselves. Otherwise, we are caretaking them in order to manage our own fears, along with our need to feel useful or important.