

Who is Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?

Assessing and Addressing Fear and Anxiety of Participants in the Outdoors

Whitney C. Ward
Indiana, University

Abstract:

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Fear is often a contributing factor in the quality of an outdoor experience. Many people have experienced the “sewing machine” leg while climbing, “butterflies” in their stomach while paddling, or many of the other signs and symptoms of fears and anxieties. Fear is natural. It can keep us safe and alive. However, fear can negatively impact an experience for an individual or group as a whole. An effective leader may use fear as a tool to promote growth and understanding creating a positive experience, while a less effective leader may abuse those fears creating a potentially negative one. This paper presents ways of addressing and assessing fears of participants, the implications of doing so, and why it is important for you as an outdoor instructor/trip leader.

The Great Depression was a time of difficulty and fear for people both individually and collectively. The future of the nation was unknown; yet people found strength in the words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inaugural speech when he said “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” What a profound statement, because of these few simple words, fear gave way to hope and understanding. However the Great Depression was not the first time that people experienced fear, nor was it the last. Today’s society, in fact, has gone so far as to commercialize fear. All one has to do is turn on the TV to see “Fear Factor” or look around to see “No Fear” T-shirts and bumper stickers. Fear is a natural part of life, rather than having “No Fear”, therefore it is important for outdoor educators to “Know Fear.” This paper will focus on the types of fears in the outdoors, the importance of addressing participants’ fear, and the implications of fear in an outdoor environment.

Fear is a natural part of life, a primitive emotion that aids the survival instinct of living organisms. This emotion is often expressed either by fight or flight reactions by most organisms when they encounter a threatening situation. A familiarization of the physiological origins of fear aids in a better understanding this primitive instinct. Deep within the primitive, reptilian portion of the brain is the amygdala. The amygdala is responsible for controlling emotions, including fear. Most living organisms have an amygdala and experience fear. This is evidenced by the fight, flight, or “play dead” syndrome. When faced with a fearful stimuli, the organism will try to alter the situation, whether it is physically removing itself, exhibiting dominance (i.e. get bigger), or exhibit extreme passiveness to the fact that it looks like it is dead. Humans are no different than other organisms, when faced with certain stimuli the same fight, flight, or play dead characteristics are exhibited. With this being said, fear is the natural response to risk and is a healthy and necessary emotion for survival (Priest & Gass, 1997).

There are a number of stimuli that cause fear in humans; however most fears experienced by participants on outdoor trips can be classified into one of four types which include physical, social, personal/emotional and unfounded. The physical classification includes things such as lack of food, bad weather, falling, poisonous plants and animals, etc. The social categorization include fears such as confrontation with others, letting others down, going unrecognized in the group, not performing to group expectations, etc. Letting myself down, lack of privacy, becoming bored, and program not

meeting my expectation are examples of types of potential fears that in the personal/emotional area. Finally, examples of unfounded fears include Bigfoot, snipe hunts, and the Abominable snowman.

It is imperative for effective outdoor educators and leaders to assess the different types of fears participants may face. Due to the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships of outdoor education (Priest 1999) social fears can naturally be an issue. Then when adventure is added to the “equation”, the sheer nature of the adventure experience, uncertain outcomes, risk, and inescapable consequences (Horwood, 1999; Priest, 1999) can be a source of participants’ personal/emotional, physical, and social fears.

Information is one of the most important factors to consider when addressing fear. Smimonov (as cited in Ewert, 1986) found that fear is a function of perceived risk, multiplied by the information required minus the information supplied (see Figure 1.). Information supplied is the only variable that can be manipulated externally. Therefore, as leaders and educators assess the participants’ fears they can influence the participants level of fear by supplying or withholding the critical information and by doing so increase or reduce the overall level of fear experienced by the participant respectively.

$$F = Fx [Pr*(Ir-Is)]$$

F = Fear
Pr = Perceived Risk
Ir = Information Required
Is = Information Supplied

(Simonov as cited in Ewert, 1986)

Figure 1. *Function of Fear*

Outdoor educators often have participants work “outside” their comfort zones. However, educators need to be careful not to push participants too far “outside” their comfort zone and stimulate unnecessary fearful feelings. In fact, outdoor educators should do everything in their power to minimize fear. The emotions of fear that originate in the amygdala tend to impede the proper functioning of the hippocampus. Located next to the amygdala, the hippocampus is the portion of the brain that is responsible for temporary knowledge storage and memory. Consequently, when emotions of fear impact the hippocampus, learning is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve because the hippocampus “shuts down” and the amygdala responds with a fight or flight state of mind.

Mortlock (as cited in Priest & Gass, 1997) proposed four stages participants, regardless of skill level, experienced in outdoor adventures. The level of fear was a significant factor in distinguishing each phase. They included play, adventure, frontier adventure and misadventure. Play was characterized by absence of fear and was described by participants as fun, boring, or a waste of time. Adventure was associated with some fear, yet participants felt they were in total control of the situation. Participants in frontier adventure experienced even higher levels of fear and lost the sense of complete control. Finally, misadventure included too much fear and the experience often ended in failure.

An effective leader is one that can recognize potential stimulus that may cause fear in participants, and in turn help the participant address those stimulus. Unfortunately, some programs and/or leaders use fear detrimentally and the participants are negatively affected. Given that these programs include too much fear and operate in the misadventure domain, they set the participant up for failure. An

extreme example includes some “boot camp” type of programs where fear is a major component. However, simply discounting a participant’s fears can have a significant impact on how that participant deals with fearful stimulus. Sometimes merely being in a new physical or social environment can be overwhelming to participants and create a frightening situation for them. The feelings and emotions that these participants feel are real and need to be addressed (this even includes the unfounded fears such as Bigfoot).

Most outdoor programs, from recreation to therapeutic in nature, rely on some sort of adventure as a medium to produce change in the participants (Hirsch, 1999; Priest & Gass, 1997). Fear, when used wisely, can be a positive tool. A common notion is that personal growth takes place when one functions outside a comfort zone. The methods used to get the participant outside of that comfort zone will often determine this personal growth. Ewert (1986) stated that systematic desensitization, or the gradual exposure to fearful situations, was a useful technique in helping participants modify fears. Unfortunately, it can also be time consuming. Flooding is another technique Ewert (1986) found to decrease fear, if used properly. Likewise, he suggested modeling and rehearsal techniques as an effective fear modifier. Effective leaders will help participants address and modify fears, and will utilize fear to their advantage. They can “play off” participants’ fears. By carefully managing fear, a leader can minimize actual risk and utilize the participants’ sense of perceived risk without compromising the experience.

The adventure experience paradigm (AEP) (Priest, 1999; Priest & Gass, 1997; Priest, 1992; Martin and Priest, 1986) was developed to explain participant behavior beyond Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory and Mortlock’s stages of adventure. It states that peak adventure is a balance of risk and competence. When the combination of risk and competence becomes slightly unbalanced the participants experience either misadventure or adventure. An even greater inequity between risk and competence leads to disaster and devastation on one end of the spectrum or exploration and experimentation on the other. Outdoor educators and leaders often try to function in the domain of peak adventure. However when Ewert’s (1986) fear model is coupled with the AEP model, peak experience correlates with levels of moderate fear (see Figure 2.). If fear is not moderated it has the potential to turn a peak adventure into a misadventure or even devastation or disaster. Moderate fear is where participants are challenged but not stressed, and in turn experience positive effects for growth. However, the key is to reach the optimal stage of enough fear in programming that participants do not become bored, but not so much fear that learning is inhibited.

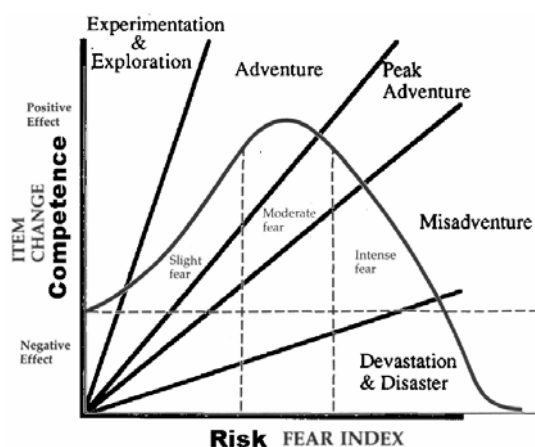


Figure 2. Ewert’s (1986) Item of Change as a Function of Fearfulness superimposed on Martin & Priest’s (1986) Adventure Experience Paradigm

Fear is a natural state of mind, and it can greatly influence a participant's outdoor adventure experience. Therefore, it is important for outdoor leaders to help participants address any fears that may inhibit learning. Providing the proper information is one way to do that, as are desensitizing, flooding, modeling, and rehearsal. These techniques will help modify or change a participant's perception of fear. Although the environment can rarely be changed, perceptions can; and the outdoor leader that takes advantage of this fact will be more effective.

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Whitney Ward, Department of Recreation and Park Administration, Indiana University, HPER 133, Bloomington, IN 47405. Phone: (812) 855-2231, email: whcward@indiana.edu

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