

11 Ways to Overcome Fear During a Crisis

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When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” he wasn’t just making a catchy statement to gin up support for his policies. He was speaking to a nation struggling with what was just the beginning of what we now know as the Great Depression. The statement is not completely true since there are plenty of other things to fear, including sharks, taxes and global pandemics. But this much is an absolute fact – especially for entrepreneurs – fear can lead to unwise decisions, which can bring about the very negative consequences we wish to avoid. There is indeed much to fear about fear itself. Here are 11 ways to overcome fear during the current crisis or the next one you experience.

1. Name the fear

When faced with a crisis and paralyzing fear, the most difficult obstacle in your path may be admitting you are afraid. It’s only once we recognize the reality of the situation that we can deal with it.

One way to better identify your fear is to imagine the worst that can happen. In her *New York Times* bestseller *Insight*, author Tasha Eurich shares a recommendation made by decision psychologist Gary Klein, who advocates a “pre-mortem” for major decisions. The idea is to imagine yourself one year in

the future and that everything has gone wrong. Your plans are a total disaster. Then write what that would look like. You might find out the worst that can happen isn't all that bad, or that you can identify steps to avoid the pitfalls that would lead to disaster.

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl quoted Spinoza's *Ethics*, which said: "Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it." Or to put it another way, Mr. Rogers said, "Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone."

Dr. Benjamin Hardy, an organizational psychologist and the author of *Personality Isn't Permanent*, shared these quotes with me and then told me, "The key to overcoming fear is giving it form." Hardy says this can be done through journaling and open conversation. "Daily journaling about how you're feeling, in addition to sharing your feelings with key people in your life, make your emotions manageable."

Hardy says, "Does this take courage? Absolutely. But it's worth it. It's worth not being bogged down by fear and needless suffering. When you are open and honest as a person, life becomes far more manageable. You stop needlessly suffering internally about unfulfilled dreams or former hurts. You move forward. And that's the freaking key! Moving forward! Moving forward as powerfully and authentically as possible."

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2. Use fear to fuel your courage

The Japanese poet Kenji Miyazawa said, “We must embrace pain and consume it for fuel on our journey.” During a crisis, you may hear others say, “Nobody can get funded right now,” or “It’s time to survive, forget about growth.” Instead, entrepreneurs like Bryan Brandenburg, founder and chief scientist of visualization company Zenerchi, says, “That’s when I go into warrior mode. Don’t follow the conventional wisdom. It comes from people who are afraid to act or are acting from a place of fear. Instead, look for the opportunities caused by others’ fear.” Or, as Warren Buffet says about how to invest successfully, “Be fearful when others are greedy and be greedy only when others are fearful.”

3. Remember the past

When faced with a worrying future, it often pays to think about how we overcame challenges in the past. When thinking of what could be lost, Melinda Dransfield, VP of sales performance elevation for Prudential Retirement, asks, “Have I lost this or something like it before? How did I deal with it before?” and then reminds herself, “I have been through hard things before.”

I started my business in 1999, just before the dot-com bubble burst. Less than two years later, the economy went into another downturn after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Then there was the 2008 real estate crisis. Now, whenever the business faces difficult circumstances, I tell myself, “You’ve been here before,” and even if I’m not sure exactly how, I know we’ll get through it.

4. Think past the crisis

Imagining a terrible future can help us avoid that future, but what if things work out great? In an April 2020 article in

Harvard Business Review, Mark W. Johnson and Josh Suskewicz share perspectives from their book *Lead from the Future*. They say that though we must take care of the here and now, we can't lose sight of the bigger picture. Whatever the future holds, they say, "You need to begin preparing for it now. And to do that right, you need to have a longer-term vision of what you aspire to become in five or even 10 years – a north star that will focus and help shape your thinking about the short- and mid-term."

I'm reminded of how I learned to mow straight lines across a large lawn by focusing on a point in the distance, rather than the ground in front of me. Even if I ran into bumps along the way, as long as I kept my eye on that point, when I finished I could look back and see a straight path. Take care of the short term, but keep an eye on what's to come or you'll find it difficult to avoid getting pulled in multiple directions.

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5. Invest in "alive time"

Your business may not be in danger of going under, but perhaps you find yourself with a lot of spare time. Ryan Holiday, author of multiple bestselling books like *The Obstacle Is the Way* and *Ego Is the Enemy*, recalls advice he got about such times from another bestselling author, Robert Green (*The 48 Laws of Power*). "He told me there are two types of time: alive time and dead time," Holiday wrote in a recent blog post. "One is when you sit around, when you wait until things happen to you. The other is when you are in control, when you make every second count, when you are learning and improving and growing."

Could you use the extra time your business has to retool your systems, train your team, or build new products and services?

6. Build your fear muscle

Think of fear like gravity: With the proper equipment, it can help you become stronger. Noah Kagan, “Chief Sumo” at AppSumo.com, likes “the coffee challenge,” in which you ask for 10 percent off your next purchase. Awkward? Difficult? Scary? That’s the point. Do it repeatedly and it will get easier, not because the task itself is any easier, but because you’ve become stronger.

Jia Jiang took this to the ultimate level when he decided to intentionally get rejected 100 times in 100 days. He was inspired after his first attempt at entrepreneurship ended in rejection, leaving Jia emotionally crushed. However, after he recognized his *fear* of rejection was harming him more than the actual rejection, he decided to embrace rejection in order to become more comfortable with it. His experiences not only helped him become almost immune to rejection but also led to a TED talk on rejection that has been viewed over 6 million times and the bestselling book *Rejection Proof*.

7. Reevaluate what makes you unique

In a crisis, it’s easy to lose focus on your business and why it exists and instead get trapped into concerns about next week’s payroll. Of course, short-term concerns are important, but if we focus on them too much we may miss opportunities. “Get very clear on your point of view,” advises Steve Watt, VP of marketing at Grapevine6. “Figure out why (and for whom) your approach offers a way forward in difficult times.” You may have a new customer segment that suddenly cares about your company’s offering in a way they didn’t before.

That’s what happened to Zoom, the video conferencing service, in the early months of 2020. As the Covid-19 virus sent tens of millions of students and workers home, Zoom found itself perfectly positioned to help them stay connected. Through

outreach (and a healthy dose of word of mouth) Zoom grew from 10 million to daily users in December 2019 to over 300 million daily users by April 2020.

In a crisis, you can combat fear as you find your new niche and let others know how you can solve their problems.

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8. Identify what you can – and can't – control

"Fear isn't bad. It's the crippling uncertainty that comes with it that eats at us," says Zachary Zimmerman, senior account manager at marketing agency Number Six. To combat that uncertainty, Zimmerman sorts out which aspects of a challenge he has control over and which he doesn't. This reduces the uncertainty and allows him to focus on what he can change without wasting time on what he can't.

9. See fear positively

Fear isn't all bad – sometimes fear keeps us safe from real harm. Fear can also give us motivation. "Fear can be a very positive emotion when it sparks in us the behavior required to overcome, and when we are confident in where we are going," says Andy Cindrich, senior consultant at FranklinCovey.

10. Find the opportunity

Marcus Sheridan's experience shows why it's so important to see every moment, even a crisis, as an opportunity. In 2008, the real estate crisis hit, and Sheridan was in the swimming pool business. Despite occupying a market in which many people were worried about losing their homes (not buying new pools), Sheridan saw that pool builders weren't using the internet to

answer buyers' questions. He started answering those questions online, and his company's website became the Wikipedia of swimming pool information. Now his company is the fastest growing fiberglass swimming pool manufacturer in the world.

"When Covid-19 hit and I realized that it was going to get ugly, once again my thoughts immediately shifted," Sheridan says. "I told myself, 'Marcus, commit now to find the opportunity in this moment.'"

In just a few months, Sheridan's company introduced a virtual sales methodology to its team of dealers all over the country and experienced tremendous success. Despite the pandemic-related economic downturn, in April 2020 Sheridan's company broke every sales record it has ever had.

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11. Don't give up

As a senior sales executive, Hunter Sebresos was present for a meeting in which investors were preparing to shut down the company he was working for. However, he knew their customers had a need, so rather than throwing up his hands and trying to find a new job, he came up with a new business model on the spot, pitched it to the investors right then and there, and won funding to create Bacon, a mobile app that allows companies to post details about their temporary staffing jobs straight from their phones and quickly fill positions, rather than spending days or weeks with a staffing or temp agency.

Your company may be on the brink, but is there a way to pivot that gives you a second chance?

There is always hope

No matter how bad things get, there's always hope for a better future. Even at the height of the Great Depression, the unemployment rate was 24.9 percent – alarming, but it means that 75.1 percent were still employed. Many of the greatest companies of all time were founded during times of great economic challenges. A short list includes Procter & Gamble, IBM, General Electric, General Motors, FedEx, Hyatt, IHOP, Disney, HP, Microsoft, Burger King, CNN and Apple (twice, first during the downturn in 1975, and then when it was resurrected from near-death during the dot-com crash of 2001).

There may be a global crisis right now, and there are certainly others brewing, but even in a crisis – especially during a crisis – there are people out there who need what you have, and there may be no better time to get busy giving it to them.

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