

PAIRED TEXTS
texts that share a
theme or topic

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?



AVIOPHOBIA
fear of flying



ARACHNOPHOBIA
fear of spiders

Fear is a normal emotion. But what happens when it takes over your life?

BY MATTHEW HUTSON



COULROPHOBIA
fear of clowns

For years, Kyle Hargreaves, 13, had a secret fear. It wasn't of snakes or spiders or flying on an airplane. Kyle was afraid of *mascots*. That's right—those silly, costumed characters you see at sporting events. Mascots caused Kyle to experience true terror. His heart would pound. Sweat would pour down his face. He would have trouble breathing. Once, at a local hockey game near his hometown of Reading, Pennsylvania, the sight of mascots caused him such distress that his dad thought he was having a stroke.

What's wrong with me? Kyle wondered. He tried to control his fear, but he couldn't. And as time went on, the problem became worse.

PHOBIA VS. FEAR

Kyle suffered from a condition called *masklophobia*, fear of mascots. More than 19 million American adults

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suffer from some kind of phobia—that is, an extreme, irrational, and lasting fear of something. When people with phobias encounter (or in some cases, just *think* about) the thing they fear, they react severely. They may **panic**, vomit, or even lose consciousness.

Scientists aren't sure what exactly causes phobias. Some could be hereditary. Others could result from bad experiences. (If a dog bites you, for instance, you might develop *cynophobia*: fear of dogs.) What scientists do know is that phobias originate in the brain.

To understand phobias, you need to know about fear. Fear is the result of a reaction that takes place mainly in two parts of the brain: the amygdala and the cortex. The amygdala is where we experience emotion. When our senses detect something potentially threatening, the amygdala causes us to react immediately. We become alert and perhaps jump back or break into a sweat—regardless of whether the threat is real. (It's better to mistake a stick for a snake than a snake for a stick!) The cortex, which processes our thoughts, is what helps us decide what to do next, such as run away (it's a king cobra!) or relax (it's just a stick).

This fear response is crucial in helping to keep us safe. In fact, all creatures, from ladybugs to elephants, are programmed to recognize and avoid threats in their environment. But being afraid of something dangerous is very different from having a phobia. With phobias, the fear response is triggered by something that isn't threatening (or isn't as threatening as the person feels it is), and then those feelings of terror don't go away. People with phobias often understand that their fears are irrational, yet they are helpless to stop them.

Given the intensity of their terror, it's understandable that people with phobias go to extreme lengths to avoid the object of their fear. Claustrophobics (people who fear small spaces) may walk up 30 flights of stairs rather than step into an elevator. Agoraphobics (people who fear the outside) have been known to stay in their homes for years. Kyle avoided sports games, amusement

parks, theme restaurants, or any other place where he might encounter a costumed character.

But avoidance makes phobias worse, says Amit Etkin, a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University. If you don't interact with the thing that scares you, the brain will never accept that it's not harmful, and scary fantasies can become more exaggerated.

CONQUERING FEAR

Not long after the hockey game, Kyle decided it was time to conquer his fear. His dad took him to the Child Study Center at Virginia Tech University. There, Kyle was treated with a common technique called exposure, in which a patient is gradually exposed to the object of fear. A patient with arachnophobia, for example, slowly moves closer to a spider. When nothing bad happens, his or her brain is reprogrammed not to see the spider as a threat.

Kyle's treatment began when he was greeted by a man carrying a bunny costume. Kyle started to panic but didn't run away. He knew he needed to face his fear. Once Kyle felt calm, the man put on the costume except for the head. Kyle again became **anxious**, but eventually he relaxed. Then the two played basketball. After a while, the man put on the head and other mascots joined the game.

Kyle was anxious every step of the way. By the end of the day, though, his fear had dissipated. That evening, he and his dad went to an annual event at Virginia Tech called "Gobblerfest," where they interacted with many mascots. Kyle felt no **trepidation** at all. At one point, he actually high-fived one of them. The transformation was remarkable. To prevent his phobia from returning, Kyle had to interact with costumed characters several times a week for a month.

To celebrate Kyle's new, fear-free relationship to mascots, his family decided to take a trip. Where did they go? Disney World, of course! ●



Lots of people have an aversion to snakes. But that doesn't mean they have ophidiophobia.



CONQUERING

FEAR

AN ETHIOPIAN FOLKTALE

Once upon a time in an Ethiopian village, there lived a boy who was so shy and fearful of the world around him that his family called him Miobe, frightened one.

"Why do you call me that?" the boy asked his grandfather.

The old man laughed. "Because you are afraid."

The boy's grandmother, his mother, his father, and the neighbors said the same thing. Miobe pondered these words and decided he must find a way to conquer fear. So when everyone was asleep, he packed a sack and set off into the world to find out what he feared and to conquer it.

That night he slept under the wide umbrella of sky and stared up at the darkness. Before drifting off, he whispered to himself, "I see you, but I will conquer you, fear."

At midnight the wolves began to howl. The sound woke Miobe, but instead of running away, he walked toward the sound, saying aloud, "I will conquer you, fear."

He walked until the sun began to rise, and when he saw its golden orb, he smiled with relief, for he had survived the first night. "I am becoming brave," he said as he walked on.

Soon he came to a village. For a moment he thought, "I don't know these people at all. They might be unkind to a stranger." But he straightened up and walked right into the village, saying aloud, "I will conquer you, fear."

He walked into the village square, and there he found the village elders gathered, muttering among themselves. As Miobe came near, they looked up and sneered, "Who are you?"

"I'm traveling the world to become brave."

The elders laughed. "Fool! No one can find bravery where it does not exist."

"What do you mean?" Miobe asked.

The elders sighed unhappily. "We are finished," said one old man. "Our village is threatened by a monster up on the mountain." Miobe followed the man's gaze to the top of the mountain. "See him, there," the old man said. Miobe squinted. He did not want to insult the man, but he saw nothing there.

"Look," said another man. "See? It has the head of a

crocodile. A monstrous crocodile!”

“And his body is as horrible as a hippopotamus. A gigantic hippopotamus!”

“It’s like a dragon!” another man cried, “with fire shooting from its snout!”

Now Miobe began to see the monster. He began to see the smoke and fire, the wrinkled skin, the fiery eyes. “I see,” he said, but silently he promised himself he would not be afraid. So he walked away from the elders, into the village proper.

Everywhere people **covered**. The little children hid inside, refusing to go to school. “If the children go outside,” the women said, “the monster will come down from the mountain and eat them. Everyone knows monsters eat children.”

The farmers hovered inside their doorways, hoes and rakes in hand; outside their horses stood unharnessed. “We cannot work,” they told Miobe. “If we go into the fields, the monster will come down and get us.”

Miobe saw wandering goats, sheep, and cows out at the edge of the village; no one came to milk them or tend to them. No one planted crops. Few left their homes, preferring to hide indoors. “The monster is as big as 10 barges!” they whispered among themselves as Miobe listened. “The monster is going to destroy us!”

Finally Miobe decided it was up to him to destroy the monster. “I wish to conquer fear,” he announced, “and so I shall go slay the monster!”

“No, son, don’t do it!” the elders cried. “You will die.”

Miobe shivered and his heart fluttered, but he was determined.

“I must conquer fear!” he said, and he set off.

At the base of the mountain, he looked up and felt a chill. The monster looked bigger and more fiery than any dragon, fiercer than a pack of wolves or a nest of

snakes. He remembered the days when he had been afraid. He took a deep breath and began to climb.

As he climbed, he looked up, but now he saw the monster seemed to be smaller. “How peculiar,” he said aloud. “My eyes are deceiving me.”

He continued to climb. When he was halfway up, he looked again. He squinted, shielding his eyes, but the monster’s eyes no longer seemed so fierce, and the flames no longer shot from its snout.

“The closer I get, the smaller he looks,” Miobe said, puzzled. He continued to climb, though now he pulled his dagger from his sack so that he would be prepared.

As he came around a bend in the path, he saw the summit before him.

He gasped. The monster had disappeared.

Miobe looked behind him. Surely the creature would sneak up from behind to attack. But when he turned, he saw nothing. He heard nothing. He held his breath.

He looked left. He looked right.

He continued to climb. At last he reached the summit and all was empty and quiet. Nothing was there. Suddenly he heard a sound at his feet. He looked down and saw a little creature—a toad with wrinkled skin and round, frightened eyes.

He bent down. “Who are you?” he asked. “How did you become so small?” The monster said nothing, so he cradled it in his hand and walked down the mountain.

When he reached the village, the people cried, “He’s safe!” and they surrounded him. Miobe held out his hand and showed them the tiny wrinkled toad. “This is the monster,” he said.

“What is your name?” asked the elder.

The creature croaked, and the elder looked up at the crowd and said, “Miobe has brought us the monster. Its name is fear.” ●

WRITING CONTEST

The folktale concludes, “Miobe has brought us the monster. Its name is fear.” Explain what this means and how it applies to both Kyle’s and Miobe’s experiences. In what way did each boy fight a monster? Send your response to **FEAR CONTEST**. Five winners will each receive *School of Fear* by Gitty Daneshvari. See page 2 for details.

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