

## Ep #71: Why We Experience Fear



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With Your Host

**Angela Kelly**

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## Ep #71: Why We Experience Fear

Hello, Empowered Principals, welcome to episode 71.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*, a not so typical, educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy, by refining your most powerful tool: your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach, Angela Kelly Robeck.

Well hello, my Empowered Principals. How are you guys this week? Oh my gosh, welcome to May. Wow, time is moving right along. I have to be honest, I completely thought that it was still March the other day, and as I was recording these podcasts, I was like, what, it is the middle of April. What is happening? I cannot believe it.

It seems like when I was a principal, I was much more aware of exactly what day and what month it was. And now that I work from home, I'm finding it to be a real challenge to know what day and even what month it is. And it's so funny to me because on one hand, I really loved working at a school because of its rhythm. Right, you've got the semesters or the trimesters. You've got the seasons. You've got the holidays. You've got the trimesters in terms of testing or teaching, all of that. That just kept me really in tune with the year and what was going on and what time of year it was.

But I have to say, also absolutely love working from home and working with my clients and I get completely lost in my work, completely lost. The day just goes by, the weeks go by, the months go by. I just love creating content for you all. It's one of my favorite things to do and I lose myself.

So, both of my jobs were fun. This one is more fun in the sense that I love helping people in the way that I want to help, and when I was a school leader, I was struggling to find how I could best serve my teams and me people, my students and my parents and community in the way that I wanted to, so I really feel what you're going through.

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By the way, I want to side note really quickly and just celebrate something. I want to celebrate each and every one of you listeners. I want to thank you so, so much for taking time to download and listen to these podcasts each week. This is truly a labor of love for me. I enjoy this tremendously and I would love to hear from each and every one of you in some capacity.

And one way that I have done that, although it's somewhat anonymous, is I love to participate in Facebook groups with principals because I love to hear what's going on, how can I just cheerlead them on, can I support them? Can I give them a tip? Anything I can do to help support you school leaders out there, I will do it. It doesn't matter to me.

So I'm in these Facebook groups and somebody posted this YouTube video of school leadership podcasts. It was like the top 11 school leadership podcasts of 2019. And guess what – this podcast was highlighted, not once, but twice on the video. I cried and I cried out of joy, not because of anything to do with me, but because it showed me that this podcast is having an impact, it's making a difference on the lives of school leaders and if there's anything that I want to leave a legacy for, it's to help improve your life, to make this job easier, to give you some more balance, a new perspective, a new way of thinking, a new way of leading, a new way of approaching your professional life and your personal life.

Anyway, I just wanted to shout out and say thank you so much because you guys are the reason I do this and you are the reason that this podcast is in the top podcasts for school leaders on YouTube. Thank you so much.

Okay, enough of that, we are jumping into a new theme for the month of May. Last month we covered one of my absolute favorite topics, and you guys, I listened to my own podcasts because I want to remember what I said because my clients will ask me, oh you said this on the podcast, and I'm like, oh yeah, what did I say?

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So I listened to them, but I also want to be the role model of being the student of my own teaching. And last month, we talked about money, as you know, it's so, so epic. If you want the workbook, all you have to do is reach out to me. I will send it to you. Sign up for my email list. That's who I sent it out to recently in the month of April, and you'll get a free copy of it.

I want you to see and experience what it's like to work with me and the types of worksheets and homework assignments I give to my students so that you can expand and evolve yourself as a human, as a school leader, as a mom, as all the things. So this month, we're going to shift gears a little bit and we are going to discuss an emotion that is one of the most common desires my clients have, and that is courage.

Every client I have ever worked with say that they wish they had the courage to do the things they want to do. They want to feel courageous, whether it's leaving the office earlier, having an honest conversation with somebody at work or home, or maybe even resigning from their position in education to pursue a lifetime dream job, they all say they would just do it if they had the courage.

So, I realize that the need for courage is so profound in how we end up getting any result that we want in our lives that I've designated this entire month to courage. That seems really appropriate to me because you guys have followed me long enough to know that the reason we do anything is because of the way we think it will make us feel. And to talk about courage, we must talk about why we want courage in the first place. And that's because of our feelings of fear.

We're going to talk about today what fear is and why we experience it and how to manage our fears; the feeling in the body that is fear, okay. So, what is fear? Fear is an emotion. It's an emotion that's a vibration in the body and fear tends to be really intense. It's one of the most intense vibrations of any emotion you can have.

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I actually just had an experience with a friend recently who is very afraid of heights. We were visiting a building – I'm not going to elaborate because I don't want to call her out, but we were visiting this building and it had this really tall atrium. She locked down on the stairs. She was so afraid of the heights. Her fear got into her body and physically stopped her from moving up the stairs. I've never seen anything like it.

So fear is real, guys, and it's intense. And it can completely prevent you, not just emotionally or mentally, but physically from doing the things you want to do. And because it's one of our most primal emotions and it's designed to keep our species alive, I understand that, we want to understand it so that we can work with it, because it's not going away.

So fear stems from the part of our brain called the amygdala and it triggers that fight, flight, or freeze response. And in my friend's case, she froze, right? All animals have this, but they don't process the emotion in the same way that we do. As animals, we have this physical and biological response to fear. Our hearts beat faster, it pumps blood into our muscles so that we can swing into action. Our pupils dilate so that we can see what's happening all around us and our brain gets hyper alert so that we can decide what action to take in a matter of milliseconds.

It happens instantaneously and it happens to animals out in the wilderness to keep them alive, to keep them from being eaten from their prey. So as humans, we also have this mental and emotional and physical response, but we get the luxury of being able to process our emotions. This is where the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex get involved.

And this can actually be helpful or hurtful. And it's helpful in the sense that it has evolved our thinking and it allows us to take contextual information and determine what actions are necessary to take. So, for example, when you go to the zoo and you see a mountain lion, you don't feel fear of being attacked by that mountain lion because your brain, one, it has prior

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knowledge of the mountain lion. In terms of zoos, your brain knows it's in a cage, you know that people have been trained, you know that the animals have been trained and that they're comfortable being around people.

So your brain has this prior knowledge of zoos. It's assessed the situation and it's determined that your brain does not need to be afraid and take action and jump into high gear to protect yourself. Now, however, if you saw that same mountain lion on your hike up in the hills, your brain is going to have a very different reaction. So it's fascinating that our brains can take in this information and rationalize our level of apparent danger, while at the same time it can also take information that's not truly inherently dangerous and create a story around it and emotions around it that lead us to not take actions we want to take but we're afraid to take.

Do you see that? It's so interesting. So, the brain can help us rationalize, it's okay to be safe in this situation even though normally that creature would not be safe to me. But it also can be like, putting myself out there on social media, oh no, that's too scary. That would result in, like, emotional and social death, so I'm not going to do that, and it creates this story as to why you shouldn't do it, right? So very interesting and I love highlighting the two because it feels the same in the body.

So the difference between physical fears and emotional fears is this; fear of physical danger and our response to the threat of death or destruction is completely universal in human beings, while emotional fears are individualized. Think about this; we all will run out of a burning building or avoid crossing in front of heavy traffic because we want to stay alive, assuming our mental health and wellbeing is in check. But the desire to love is hardwired into us and the brain's use of fear is there on purpose to keep us alive and safe.

Now, that being said, emotional fear, on the other hand, is individualized. Isn't that amazing when you think about it? Not everybody has the same

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kinds of emotional fears. Some people are afraid to speak in public, others are not. Some people are afraid of making decisions and upsetting other people and having people mad at them, other people make strong decisions all day long and don't worry about it. So why is that?

That's because emotional fear is always based on a thought; a belief that something is dangerous or will cause us harm, either physically or emotionally. And this is why some people love rollercoaster and other people are really afraid of them. Some people believe they are safe and fun while other people see them as dangerous and scary.

And this is also why some people are afraid to say no to someone while another person has no problem saying no. The person who is afraid to say no is worried about how that person will think and feel if they say no. So they're thinking about the other person's response and how that person's response will impact them. The person who is not afraid to say no feels that holding true to their own boundaries and answering honestly is more important than taking responsibility for another person's feelings.

Now, emotional fear is always past or future focused. I find this so, so amazing and it really helps me put myself and my own fears in check. Physical fear is always in the present moment. We only experience physical kind of fear and that scared feeling like we're going to be killed when we're actually presented with a fight or flight moment. Emotional fear, however, is based on the thoughts either of our past or what we anticipate is going to happen in our future.

We have evidence from our past that something was painful and we want to avoid it from happening again, or we anticipate future pain and we avoid taking action that might result in future pain. This is the foundation of procrastination. So emotional fear, it's either you're thinking about something that happened to you in the past that you don't want to happen again, or you're worried about something possibly happening in your future.

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This is why we procrastinate. We don't want to recreate a negative experience from our past or we don't want to create a new negative experience in our future. That means we end up putting off tasks because our brain tells us that it's going to be difficult or hard, boring, tedious, insignificant, not worthy, whatever your brain tells you. And that's because our brain is always going to default to what feels most comfortable in the immediate moment.

We also put off taking tasks that we believe are going to be really scary or risky. Quitting a job, moving to a new city, spending large sums of money, all of those fears can trigger us emotionally. It is because of our brain's belief system around what fear is and what it will do to us that stops us from achieving our goals and dreams every single time.

Here's the thing; even though physical and emotional fear stems from different parts of the brain, the body cannot tell the difference between the two. When you think about something that scares you, let's say losing your job, and you think about the impact that losing your job would have on your life, your body is going to respond physically in the same way that it does when you're actually in physical danger.

Your heart is going to race, your muscles are going to tense up, your stomach feels nauseous, your brain starts to unfold an entire story before your eyes. It thinks about what will happen and how it will feel from the minute you hear the words you're being let go to having to tell your family you're looking for a job, to having to actually go look for that job, to not having an income, to spending down your savings, to sell all your possessions, and downgrade your entire lifestyle and live in a box next to the freeway.

This story of doom and gloom that our brain creates in our head can feel just as painful as being physically hurt. Our body cannot tell the difference, so it ends up responding in the same way. And that's why we can lock

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down whether it's emotional fear or physical fear, we can lock down in the same way.

When we experience a fear as vibrations in the body and the body cannot tell the difference between a real threat and one that has been created in our mind, we will definitely avoid taking action, even when there's truly no danger.

I want to highlight something that our brain does when it's indulging in emotionally scary thoughts. The kind of things we perceive as painful are also emotional, not physical in nature. In the example of losing our job, the process of being told we no longer have a job is not physically painful. No one's actually hitting you or beating you up or trying to kill you, it is just emotionally painful.

The reason we don't want to be fired is because of what we make it mean. We make it mean that we suck, we're not good enough, the boss didn't like us, that other people think that we're bad at what we do, that we are never going to be profitable or have a job again. It's a horrible feeling, that thought of getting fired is one of the worst fears people have because it definitely makes us vulnerable, we think that we are not good enough, all of the things.

So those thoughts create intense negative emotions, and if you believe people think you're bad at being a school leader because you were let go, you're going to feel an incredible amount of embarrassment and shame. What we're fearing is not actually like being killed physically. We fear having to feel those negative emotions that come with being let go.

Our fear is that we're going to have to experience that burn of embarrassment and shame and that we're going to be rejected and ostracized by our colleagues. Our fear of feeling negative emotions is so

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great that some say they would rather endure physical pain than emotional pain. And this is the reason we hold ourselves back.

My coach Stacy calls this the fear of social death. As humans, we are wired to connect and belong. We want to be loved by others. The thought of others not wanting us, not liking us, not trusting us or including us is so painful that we will do whatever it takes to be liked by others. And you've probably noticed this on your staff. You've probably noticed this with your students.

It's a human condition. But the problem with it is this; number one, we don't get to control what others think and feel about us, and number two, it completely stops us from pursuing a life that we want. It does not serve us. And you guys, this is why clients hire me.

They see that their current patterns of behavior and what they want is to figure out a way to break out of those patterns, but they can't see it. They can't figure out their own way because they have their blind spots, right? So they want to start taking a different action in their lives, both at work and at home, and they tell me they want the courage to do the things they crave and they want to leave their schools more courageously.

And what they're really saying is that they want to be able to take action even though they're feeling fear but they're not sure how to go about it. It's really hard to do and that's why I love what I do is I help people see the path for them. So I teach them the concept of compelling fear and repellant fear. Compelling fear is when you have something that you really want to do but it feels really new and scary, yet it still compels you.

It's like when you're a teenager and you want to learn how to drive a car, you probably felt some significant fear in learning how to drive and that first couple of times you sat in the driver's seat and you were actually on the road driving or the first time you had to get onto the freeway. But as that

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teenager, you were so enthusiastic to learn because you wanted the result of having your license and your freedom to come and go however you wanted, or at least in the confines of your parents' rules, but you got to come and go more than you wanted to stay in your comfort zone and sit in your room all day.

These compelling fears are desires that keep coming up in your body even though your brain is telling you it's too scary or different or that it's going to result in social death. So compelling fears are things that you want to do that feel really good at the thought of them but you're scared or afraid to do it. It's like when you wanted to become a principal but you were kind of afraid but nervous and excited and enthusiastic all in one big bundle, that's compelling fear.

Repellant fear, on the other hand, is fear that feels bad. It might not be physically threatening, but the thought of doing so creates a fear that tells you no, that you're not on the right path. This fear feels much more intuitive to me. Both are intuitive, but this one is like deep down you get that gut feeling of don't go down that dark hallway or that dark alley, that kind of intuitiveness.

It comes up when you're trying to make a decision and the thought of choosing whatever path feels very heavy or kind of yucky. Perhaps someone has tried to convince you to invest in their startup company and they're telling you that the potential returns are going to be amazing, but every time you think about it you get this really negative vibe in your body. Or perhaps it shows up when you're considering not taking action.

When you think about having your driver's license or not, the discomfort or fear of not getting your license is far worse than the discomfort you'll go through to obtain the license. So it's like, when you want to do something, the thought of not taking the action, like what will it cost you not to take the action feels much worse than the fear of actually taking the action.

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Our brains want the immediate gratification, so it's going to try and convince you not to do the scary thing and not learn how to drive. But because we have our prefrontal cortex and we do have the luxury of rationalizing those primitive fears, we get to see that the long-term impact of having our driver's license far outweighs the immediate fears and obstacles that we have to overcome in order to get it.

I use this approach with my clients all the time. When they want something they don't yet have but they're afraid of taking the steps to getting what they want, I ask them, what is the cost of not taking the action right now? For example, one of my clients was compelled to move to another city. She was unhappy in her current situation and where she lived and felt really called to this new place, but extreme fear had her freezing up from taking any steps towards the move.

Her thoughts kept spinning around about what others would think and could she afford it and she didn't know anybody in the new city and all of her connections were in her current city and so on and so on. So although we came up with a step by step plan for her, she wasn't really going to take any action until we calmed those fears and created a reason so compelling that it would far outweigh her fears of doing the work.

So I asked her, what would be the cost in five years of not taking the action now to move to your desired place? What would the cost be in 10 years or 15 years or 20 or 25 years? So here is my question for you; what is it that you are wanting out of your career in education?

Are you happy in your job? Do you love what you do and how you spend your time? If not, ask yourself why. What are you not doing that you want to start doing and what's holding you back from doing that?

The answer is always going to stem back to something in the form of fear. One final note, you guys, fear is universal. Fear happens to protect us and

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keep us safe. It means well and I understand why we have it and it's never going away, but it does not always help you achieve the life you want to live.

All kinds of fear stems from a thought. Every fear that you have stems from a thought, even the physical fear because your brain has a thought so quickly like I'm going to die or they're going to attack me or there's somebody in the house. That thought generates that fear and stimulated the entire body into action.

So, your job is to question the thoughts that seem like fear, especially those emotional fears, and check and see if that thought is accurate. Are you really going to be disliked by everyone? And by the way, who is everyone? Name the everyone. Name all of the people who are your everyone.

Are you really going to be disliked forever? Are you going to be ostracized forever? Are you going to experience a social death? Will you really lose all of your money and live on the streets? Is it really true that you'll get fired if you leave work before 6pm? Come on, guys, you've got to have your personal life.

You've got to question some of these crazy thoughts you have that are creating fear that is blocking you from living a balanced life. Notice what thoughts are creating your fears and write them down. Take a look at them on paper.

Do they seem as scary once you see them in writing? What could you do to discount those fears? Are they really true? School leaders, you are some of the most accomplished people on the planet. You have the ability to live and work how you wish and be the example of what is possible. Do not let fear override your empowerment.

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We're going to talk about courage next week. I can't wait to hear from you. I want you to join me on my Facebook business group and share with me, what are your fears? Why are they stopping you? What is it that you want? Drop me a line and let me know so I can help guide you through the process, alright? I will talk with you all next week. Take care, have a good week, bye-bye.

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