

Lissa Rankin on Moving from Fear to Freedom

by April Thompson

Lissa Rankin wears many hats: physician, mystic, author, artist, speaker and blogger. What unites her many pursuits is a passion for helping people optimize their health and understand how science and spirituality converge toward that goal.



A former obstetrician and gynecologist, Rankin is the founder of the Whole Health Medicine Institute, in San Francisco, which trains doctors in mind-body-spirit medicine. She's authored six books to date, including the bestseller *Mind over Medicine*, *The Fear Cure* and *The Anatomy of a Calling*. She lives in California's Marin County and blogs at LissaRankin.com.

What common signs indicate that fear is affecting our health?

When people are sick, there is almost always an element of fear. Many of us have "ridden shotgun" at one time or another with a health diagnosis, and that's scary, so even if it's not predisposing the illness itself, it can stimulate fear. Studies from institutions such as the Harvard School of Public Health and Carnegie Mellon University have discovered strong correlations between fear, stress and anxiety and health issues. When fear is predisposing us to illness, addressing the root cause of the issue is preventive medicine.

Whether triggered by something trivial or real, fear activates the "fight-or-flight" stress response in the brain. The body has natural self-healing mechanisms, but these only operate when our nervous system is relaxed, so effectively dealing with fear is foundationally critical to wellness.

How can we distinguish between true and false fear?

True fear is an actual threat to physical survival, like being approached by someone wielding a gun. However, most fear is generated by a story we make up in our minds. Our wild imaginations, the source of beautiful creativity, can be a destructive force, too, as we envision all kinds of worst-case scenarios, most of which will not come true.

Modern-day humans average more than 50 stress responses a day, which indicates we're way off track in our relationship to fear. The mind constantly strategizes how to get what it wants and avoid what it doesn't. A spiritual practice can help interrupt the "monkey mind" constantly

ruminating on what could go wrong.

Paying attention to fear around practical issues like not being able to pay bills is helpful because it can keep us from being reckless, such as buying an unneeded luxury item although our mortgage payment looms. But letting false fear prevent us from following a dream, ending an unhealthy relationship or leaving a toxic job can predispose us to illness. Fear is the emotional equivalent of pain in the body. Attend to it when it arises; try to understand what it is telling you and see what's in need of healing.

What are some effective ways to defang false fear?

Ultimately, we need to come into the right relationship with uncertainty; it's the gateway to possibility. People often think that fear provides protection, when our intuition, which typically requires a relaxed state of mind, is a far more effective protector. There have been studies about doctors following their hunches to a patient's underlying condition, leading to life-saving diagnoses.

How can we cultivate courage, curiosity and resilience, rather than feed our fears?

Cultivating a spiritual practice such as mindfulness helps put a pause between a feeling like fear and the reaction that might ensue. You learn to sit with uncomfortable feelings and recognize the story you are spinning in your mind about what's happening. It also means letting go of expectations when things don't go as planned.

Fear is my cue to activate a practice of surrender; to turn something over to the universe. I will also ask for help to calm my heart and let go of attachments. For me, this life-changing practice means I now trust the mystery more than my mind. I trust the unknown more than science and logic. The latter may be useful tools when doing taxes or a research paper, but I don't trust them to be the best navigation system of my life or help me in a crisis.

Psychology isn't enough to address fear, which comes with the territory if you think that we are just flesh robots programmed to maximize self-interest, alone in a hostile universe. Once you learn to see the possibilities and hand over the wheel to a greater, benign organizing intelligence, something unwinds in the nervous system and we relax into the wonder of mystery.

Connect with freelance writer April Thompson at AprilWrites.com.