



Why do we Fear?

Copy sheet 15

• Read the text and answer these questions:

- 1 Why do we need fear?
- 2 What is the 'face of fear'?
- 3 What did Charles Darwin say about the face of fear?
- 4 How did he prove his point?
- 5 What is an instinct?
- 6 What are we afraid of today?
- 7 Do you agree that we are in as much danger today as 100 years ago? Why/why not?
- 8 What is anticipation?
- 9 Do you anticipate terrible things? What?
- 10 Have you learned something new about fear?

Why do we Fear?

If we couldn't be afraid, we wouldn't survive for long. We'd be walking into oncoming traffic, stepping off of roof tops and handling poisonous snakes. We'd be hanging out with people who have tuberculosis. In humans and in all animals, the purpose of fear is to promote survival.

During the 19th-century debate surrounding evolution, the "face of fear" – that wide-eyed, gaping grimace that often accompanies sheer terror – became a talking point. Why do people make that face when they're terrified? Some said God had given people a way to let others know they were afraid even if they didn't speak the same language. Charles Darwin said it was a result of the instinctive tightening of muscles triggered by an evolved response to fear. To prove his point, he went to the reptile house at the London Zoological Gardens. Trying to remain perfectly calm, he stood as close to the glass as possible while a large snake lunged toward him on the other side. Every time it happened, he grimaced and jumped back.

Most of us are no longer fighting or running for our lives in the wild, but fear is far from an outdated instinct. It serves the same purpose today as it did when we might run into a lion while carrying water back from the river. Only now, we're carrying a wallet and walking down city streets. The decision not to take that shortcut through the deserted alley at midnight is based on a rational fear that promotes survival. Only the stimuli have changed – we're in as much danger today as we were hundreds of years ago, and our fear serves to protect us now as it did then.

Darwin had never experienced the bite of a poisonous snake, and yet he reacted to it as if his life were in danger. Most of us have never been anywhere near The Plague, but our heart will skip a beat at the sight of a rat. For humans, there are other factors involved in fear beyond instinct. Human beings have the sometimes unfortunate gift of anticipation, and we anticipate terrible things that might happen – things we have heard about, read about or seen on TV. Most of us have never experienced a plane crash, but that doesn't stop us from sitting on a plane with white knuckles gripping the armrests. Anticipating a fearful stimulus can provoke the same response as actually experiencing it.

promote · virka fyri
gaping · gapandi
sheer · rein
terrified · ræðsluslugin
evolved · ment
lunged · skeyt seg fram
stimuli · (flt.) ávirkan
The Plague · svartideyði
beyond · umframt
anticipation · væntan