

FEAR • GREED • GUILT
DECEPTION • BETRAYAL • REVENGE

SOURCES OF SUFFERING

SALMAN AKHTAR



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Fear, Greed, Guilt, Deception,
Betrayal, and Revenge

Salman Akhtar

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To
RAMA RAO GOGINENI & APRIL FALLON
in friendship



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Salman Akhtar, MD, is professor of psychiatry at Jefferson Medical College and a training and supervising analyst at the Psychoanalytic Center of Philadelphia. He has served on the editorial boards of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* and the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*. His more than 300 publications include fifteen books—*Broken Structures* (1992), *Quest for Answers* (1995), *Inner Torment* (1999), *Immigration and Identity* (1999), *New Clinical Realms* (2003), *Objects of Our Desire* (2005), *Regarding Others* (2007), *Turning Points in Dynamic Psychotherapy* (2009), *The Damaged Core* (2009), *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (2009), *Immigration and Acculturation* (2011), *Matters of Life and Death* (2011), *The Book of Emotions* (2012), *Psychoanalytic Listening* (2013), and *Good Stuff* (2013)—as well as forty-two edited or co-edited volumes in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Dr Akhtar has delivered many prestigious addresses and lectures including, most recently, the inaugural address at the first IPA-Asia Congress in Beijing, China (2010). Dr Akhtar is the recipient of the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association's* Best Paper of the Year Award (1995), the Margaret Mahler Literature Prize (1996), the American Society of Psychoanalytic Physicians' Sigmund Freud Award (2000), the American Psychoanalytic Association's Edith Sabshin Award (2000), the American College

of Psychoanalysts' Laughlin Award (2003), Columbia University's Robert Liebert Award for Distinguished Contributions to Applied Psychoanalysis (2004), the American Psychiatric Association's Kun Po Soo Award (2004), the Irma Bland Award for being the Outstanding Teacher of Psychiatric Residents in the country (2005), and the Nancy Roeske Award (2012). Most recently, he received the Sigourney Award (2013), which is the most prestigious honour in the field of psychoanalysis. Dr Akhtar is an internationally sought speaker and teacher, and his books have been translated in many languages, including German, Turkish, and Romanian. His interests are wide and he has served as the film review editor for the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, and is currently serving as the book review editor for the *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*. He has published seven collections of poetry and serves as a scholar-in-residence at the InterAct Theatre Company in Philadelphia.

INTRODUCTION

Suffering is integral to life. Alongside joy and excitement, it permeates our existence as we pass from infancy through adulthood to old age. It accompanies us at each developmental epoch and at every maturational milestone. It is even there after a successful psychoanalytic treatment. Indeed, Freud admitted that all psychoanalysis can do is to “transform hysterical misery into common unhappiness” (1950a, p. 305). And, he was not alone in coming to the conclusion that a certain amount of emotional pain is inevitable in the course of life. Buddha’s first Noble Truth, Ghalib’s equation of *qaid-e-hayat* (prison of existence) with *bund-e-ghum* (bondage to pain), and David Thoreau’s declaration that all men live a life of “quiet desperation”—all speak to this very point. This is ordinary suffering: irreducible and inherent in life. Elsewhere, I have delineated its components under the rubric of “burdens of sanity” (Akhtar, 2009, p. 42).

However, such suffering is not the topic of my book, which deals with suffering that is unfortunate, unnecessary, excessive, pathological, and is remediable. To be sure, the book is not exhaustive; the fact that it does not address the distress emanating from envy, shame, regret, hate, and boredom attests to its modest scope. Within that limited reach, however, it seeks to underscore the multifaceted ways in which we

encounter suffering in clinical and social settings. The book identifies six such “sources of suffering”. The first three, namely, fear, greed, and guilt, cause an individual to suffer privately, though not entirely without interpersonal consequences. The second three, namely, deception, betrayal, and revenge, lead others to suffer, though not entirely without subjective distress on the part of the individual himself.

In elucidating the intricacies of these six sources of suffering I have attempted to deal with each emotion’s phenomenological, developmental, and sociocultural aspects. Wherever possible, I have included pertinent information from the related fields of anthropology, sociology, ethology, and evolutionary sciences. I have included literary references as well as clinical vignettes to highlight the nuances of fear, greed, guilt, deception, betrayal, and revenge. My aim is to help the clinicians empathise with these complex human experiences, recognise their emergence within the transference-countertransference axis, and facilitate ego dominance and mastery on the part of their patients. Though not a guidebook or a therapeutic manual, my book is unabashedly pragmatic. Its purpose is to help psychoanalysts and psychotherapists become more skilful in helping their patients renounce, reduce, or reframe their suffering. The novice in our field is my main audience but if those who are more experienced find something of benefit in my scribbles, I will be delighted.

PART I

SUFFERING TOLERATED



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CHAPTER ONE

Fear

Fear is ubiquitous. All of us experience it at one time or another. The sound of footsteps approaching us from behind in a dark alley, an unexpected visit to the city morgue, eye contact with a large alligator in the zoo, and a precipitous “fall” of a rollercoaster can all give us goose bumps of terror. We shriek, scream, or simply become paralysed with fear. We readily recognise its dark arrival in the pit of our stomachs and feel its movement in our blood.

But do we understand the actual nature of fear? Do we know the purpose it serves? Do we agree upon the circumstances under which it is “normal” to be afraid? And, when does fear become abnormal or morbid? Is fear to be avoided at all costs or can this bitter gourd of emotion be transformed into a sweet mango of cultural delight? Questions like these suggest that fear is simple and self-evident only on the surface. Examined carefully, it turns out to be a complex and nuanced phenomenon.

Fear

Webster’s dictionary defines fear as “an unpleasant, often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger” (Mish, 1998,

p. 425). While the source of the threat is not identified, the tone makes it clear that the danger referred to resides in external reality. Fear, in other words, is a dysphoric reaction to an actual object (e.g., a wild animal, a knife-wielding drunkard), event (e.g., an earthquake, a stampede), or situation (e.g., watching a horror movie, losing control of a car on an icy road) that is felt to be threatening. The extent of dysphoria in the face of approaching danger varies and four levels of fear's severity are identified in the English language: (a) *apprehension*, which refers to a mild anticipation of a bad occurrence; (b) *dread*, which blends the conviction that one is facing danger with a powerful reluctance to encounter the scary object or situation; (c) *panic*, which denotes an overwhelming sense of being scared, coupled with alarmed hyperactivity (e.g., pacing, running away) and physiological arousal (e.g., increased heartbeat, laboured breathing); and (d) *terror*, which signifies an extreme degree of consternation, a feeling of doom, "catastrophic aloneness" (Grand, 2002), and psychomotor paralysis.

The fact that fear is ubiquitous in the animal kingdom suggests that it is a "needed emotion", that is, one that is important for the organism's survival and functioning. For all living beings, including humans, the emotion of fear serves as a protective device; it warns them that some danger is approaching and they had better undertake measures to avoid it. This could be in the form of actively combating the "enemy" or rapidly escaping from it, meaning the well-known "fight-or-flight" response to threats.

Some fears are widespread over the animal kingdom and seem "hard-wired". Others are the result of developmentally unfolding, epigenetic sequence of fantasies that are specific to human beings. Among the former are fear of loud noises, sudden and jerky movements, looking down from heights, and animals that have fangs, claws, sharp teeth, and can jump or move at great speed (Abraham, 1913a; Akhtar & Brown, 2005). Present from birth onwards and persistent throughout life (even if in attenuated forms and at a preconscious level), these fears give testimony to man's essential kinship with animals since their function is self-protective and oriented towards survival. Among the latter are the developmentally derived fears of loss of love objects, loss of love, and castration (Freud, 1926d); fear of death joins this list somewhat later during the course of psychic development. These "hard-wired" and developmentally derived fears exist in both sexes though there is some evidence (Horner, 1968; Miller, 1994; Symonds, 1985) that,

owing to socialisation patterns and internalised cultural biases, fear of becoming alone and fear of success are somewhat more prevalent among women.

Another point needs mention here. The experience of fear is mediated through two different routes: a shorter, rapid, and subcortical route which goes directly through the amygdala and a longer, slower, and more complex route that includes hippocampal and cortical participation (Damasio, 1999; Emanuel, 2004; Pally, 2000). Each route has an identical output: a fear response. However, the shorter route lacks the benefit of contextual information that the longer route provides. As a result, the shorter route produces a direct and simple fear response which can be tempered or even entirely inhibited by the longer route. The profound implications of this for psychic development and for therapeutic intervention are nowhere better illustrated than in the “visual cliff” experiment devised by Gibson and Walk (1960).

This experiment consists of having the glass floor of a room papered, from below, with a chequerboard design up to its midpoint. As a result, the first half of the floor does not appear any different from ordinary floors but, as the paper affixed from below runs out, the floor suddenly appears threatening due to the depth perception through the transparent glass. The point at which the transparent glass begins is the “visual cliff”. Now, a toddler is placed on the papered end of the floor and his or her mother is asked to watch him from across the room. The toddler begins to make his way towards her but abruptly stops at encountering the “visual cliff”. If the mother remains impassive, the child does not move forward. However, if the mother smiles, spreads her arms, and vocally encourages the child to come to her, the child crawls or walks over the transparent glass. Mother’s loving support activates the hippocampal-cortical system that dampens the fear aroused by the amygdala-sponsored pathway mentioned above.

While this is a salutary consequence of environmental modulation of “hard-wired” childhood fears, adverse and even sinister interplays of childhood vulnerability and caregiver input also exist. Children (more so than adults) need company and

... their needs for attachment experiences and even moments of intimacy will lead them to shadow, seek out, and submissively engage the parents who, for the most part, cause them pain and disappointment. Their avidity for exploration and assertion will

lead them to follow a ball out into a dangerous street, climb up an unstable support, or put fingers in electric plugs. Their love of sensual enjoyment from fondling, kissing, and rocking will result in their participating in sexually over-exciting play or overt seductions by older children and adults. The pleasure of social contact will expose older children to the smiling-faced inducements of a kidnapper, and the same desire coupled with greed leaves adults exposed to psychopathic salesmen and con men. Thus, parents must inculcate a sense of danger as an active educative effort. (Lichtenberg, 1991, pp. 396–397)

Such nuanced interplay of “nature versus nurture” variables in the genesis and modulation of fear undergirds the epigenetic unfolding of phase-specific fears throughout childhood development. “Natural” fears of starvation and physical injury are given specific “human” colouring via the potential danger of anaclitic betrayal and loss during infancy, castration and genital mutilation during early childhood, and moral anxiety (the internalised consequence of the preceding fear) during later childhood and adolescence (Freud, 1926d). Still later, in the course of adult life, fear of death appears on the psychic horizon; multiply determined and culturally variable, this fear combines fears of physical infirmity, separation from love objects, and loss of self (Akhtar, 2010; Chadwick, 1929; Freud, 1923b; Hoffman, Johnson, Foster & Wright, 2010; Natterson & Knudson, 1965; Zilboorg, 1943).

Anxiety

Fear and anxiety share some characteristics. Both evoke a sense that something bad is about to happen. Both are unpleasant and undesirable experiences. Both can serve as alarms and thus protect us from danger. However, in other ways, the two experiences are different. Fear is a response to external danger; anxiety to dangers emanating from the internal world. As early as 1895, Freud noted the relationship between “unpleasure” (not yet delineated as anxiety) to earlier painful experiences. He wrote:

If the memory image of the hostile object is in any manner freshly cathected (e.g., by fresh perceptions), a condition arises which is not pain but has a similarity to pain. It includes unpleasure and the