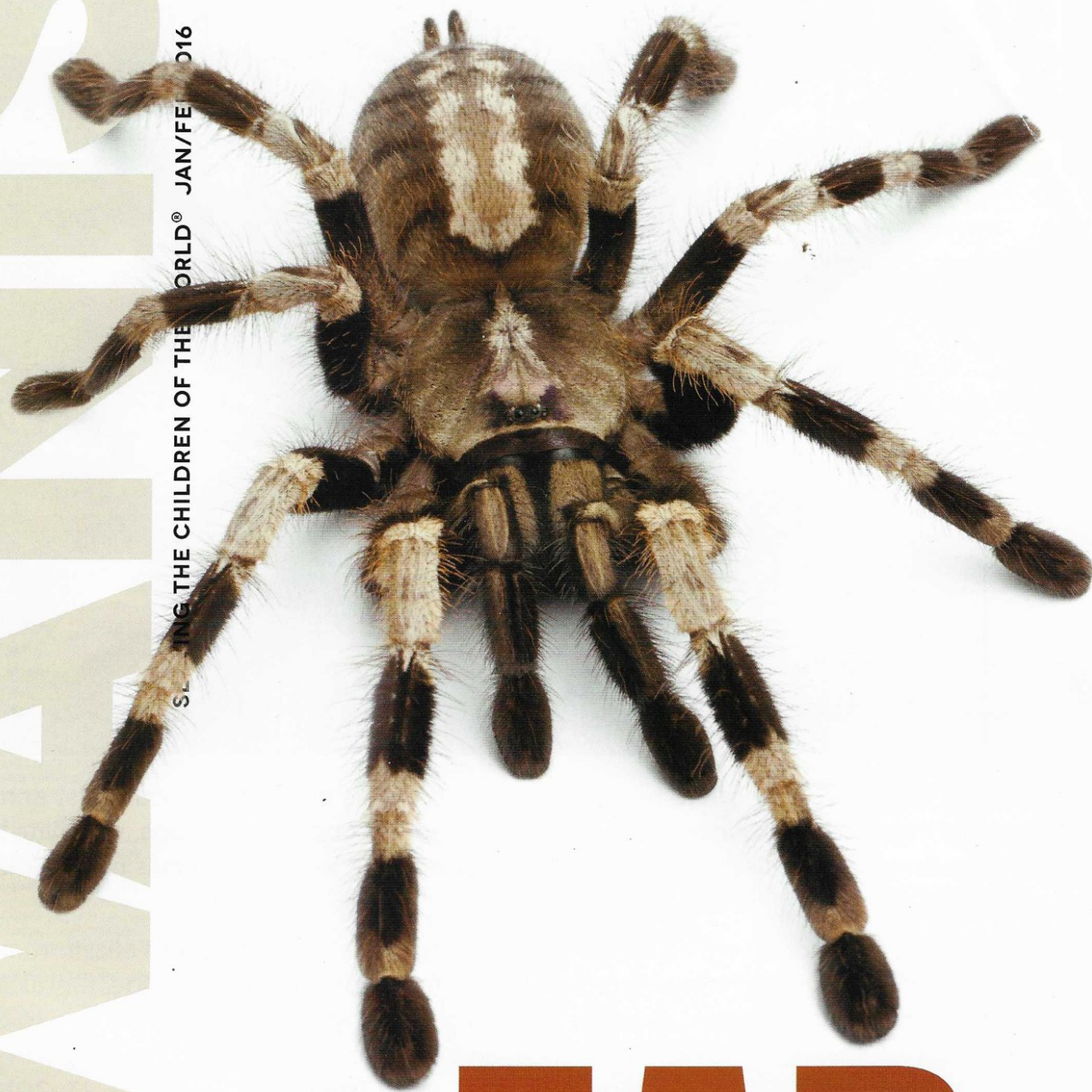


SLAYING THE CHILDREN OF THE WORLD® JAN/FEB 2016



FEAR

how it affects our lives and
what we can do about it

FEAR ITSELF

EXPERTS SAY THAT WHILE FEELING A LITTLE BIT OF FEAR IS CONSTRUCTIVE, FEELING TOO MUCH CAN CAUSE HUGE PROBLEMS.

STORY BY SAM STALL





Christopher Bader, professor of sociology at Chapman University in Orange, California, knows what makes us shudder.

He's one of the principal investigators on the Chapman University Survey of American Fears, an annual national poll about what frightens us. His front-row seat to terror has taught him just how misguided and illogical some of our deeply held dreads can be. You'd think that would inoculate him against his own unreasoning apprehensions.

Far from it.

"I'm paralyzed by needles," Bader admits. "I have a mother who's diabetic, so I should be getting checked regularly. But because of this fear, I avoid it as much as possible, and it's directly detrimental to my health."

Of course he should know better. But then again, so should *everyone* with an unreasoning fear of needles, spiders, flying, cats ... you name it. But as anyone who's ever been frightened of something already knows, fear is a powerful thing. For eons it's helped us survive in a dangerous world. But it can do a great deal of damage if allowed to run rampant.

"Human beings evolved to respond quickly to threats and to respond to them with the fight-or-flight response," says Margee Kerr, sociologist, fear researcher and author of *Scream: Chilling Adventures in the Science of Fear*.

"A loud sound, a flash of light, something suddenly moving, those are all universal triggers for our threat response," she says.

But there's a flaw in our fear software. Since most modern humans don't face the daily dangers our primitive ancestors did, our fight-or-flight response often has little to do. So sometimes it "makes its own fun" by afflicting us

"HUMAN BEINGS EVOLVED TO RESPOND QUICKLY TO THREATS AND TO RESPOND TO THEM WITH THE FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSE."

with unnecessary anxiety, or focusing our fear on some more-or-less random thing. And that's how we get phobias.

"Sometimes fear mechanisms will cause us to react to nonthreatening stimuli," says Dr. Lorenzo Diaz-Mataix of the LeDoux Lab at the Center for Neural Science at New York University. "However, most of the phobias are for very specific stimuli; so panic only happens when you face that particular thing. Which means that most phobic persons can live a perfectly normal life simply by avoiding the source of their phobia."

SO the answer for anyone who panics at the sight of spiders, snakes, high bridges, tunnels, elevators or any of the myriad other things that can cause a phobic reaction: avoid it. Of course while dodging, say, clowns is pretty straightforward, avoiding high bridges could be tougher—especially if you have to cross one to get to work. In such cases exposure, in which a patient is desensitized by contact with the thing they dread, can do the trick.

But phobias are just one form of unreasoning, potentially detrimental fear. A larger concern, in Bader's view, is the breathtaking disconnect between how much we fear something and the actual threat it poses. Nothing illustrates this better than America's endless, near-obsessive fretting about crime.

"It was quite stunning for us," Bader says. "Americans almost universally think that all forms of violent crime are increasing, at least somewhat. The majority think they've increased dramatically in the last 20 years. And they're just wrong. All forms of violent crime have *decreased* dramatically."

You wouldn't know that from watching the evening news, which seems to devote a good portion of each broadcast to the latest mayhem. And therein lies the problem. Putting a bunch of violent anomalies into one package makes crime look far

more common than it really is.

That overload can have disheartening repercussions. Bader says that people harboring a small, reasonable fear of criminal activity often react in a healthy, productive way. They might talk to their neighbors, keep an eye out for trouble or start a neighborhood watch group. But if the fear becomes too great, they retreat into their homes and stop interacting with their neighbors. And that, ironically, can open their neighborhood to the very criminal activity they dread.

"A host of studies have shown that when people who fear crime start to bunker up, they create a self-fulfilling prophecy," Bader says. "When all the good people leave the streets, the only ones left are the actual criminals."

Fear overload can be disastrous in other situations as well. For instance, studies show that people who are moderately concerned about natural disasters will take measures to prepare, while the truly frightened tend to shut down and do nothing at all.

Fortunately there are ways to control these nagging, non-phobic anxiety producers. If crime or other "big picture" issues trouble you, one of the best and easiest remedies is to cut back on TV news. Or watch it with the understanding that what you're seeing isn't a window on reality, but rather a collection of eye-catching (and rare) oddities.

"WE'RE finding that one of the largest drivers of fear, and one of the biggest predictors of people having a host of fears, is watching television," Bader says. "We can't stop people from being attracted to interesting rarities. It's in our nature. But we need to understand that the only reason these messages are being presented, and the only reason they get our attention, is because they're rare."

Kerr thinks such an approach can also help with such common concerns as fear of public speaking or of flying. Plane travel can be particularly thorny because it's packed with so many anxiety-producing triggers, including fear of loss of control, fear of heights, fear of falling, fear of enclosed spaces ... and on and on.

Many of these issues can be allayed simply by flying regularly and becoming intimately familiar with the process. And it doesn't hurt to realize that, statistically, the inside of a plane is one of the safest places in which you can ever find yourself.

Indeed, shining the light of reason on your anxiety can do wonders. Take such common bugaboos as spiders and public speaking. Or a more recent "disorder" called *nomophobia*—fear of losing your cell phone. Kerr advises listing your fears and thinking about the worst possible thing that could happen if they came true. If a spider

jumped on your shoulder, could it actually hurt you? If you gave a horrible speech, would your life really be ruined? And if you misplaced your cell phone, would it be a disaster or a mere inconvenience?

"Confront the fear in your mind and walk through it," Kerr says. "Imagine the worst thing that could happen. Then come out on the other side and say, 'That could happen, but I could deal with it and be okay.'"

It's also important to remember that while excessive fear is a problem, a reasonable amount is not only healthy, but vital for our survival. That hardwired impulse to leap away from sudden noises or strange animals has kept us safe for millennia. And a bit of apprehension about the future can goad us to either prepare for tough times or take steps to make sure they never happen.

"We need fear to survive," says Diaz-Mataix. "Fear exists in us only because it has helped generations of humans survive and reproduce."

"We're not trying to give the impression that all fear is bad," Bader adds. "We're trying to show that when our fears grow too large and get out of control, they can harm us. It's healthy, but it can reach a tipping point where people's behavior results in irrational actions."

So think of fear as the Tabasco sauce of emotions. A little bit goes a long, long way. **[K]**