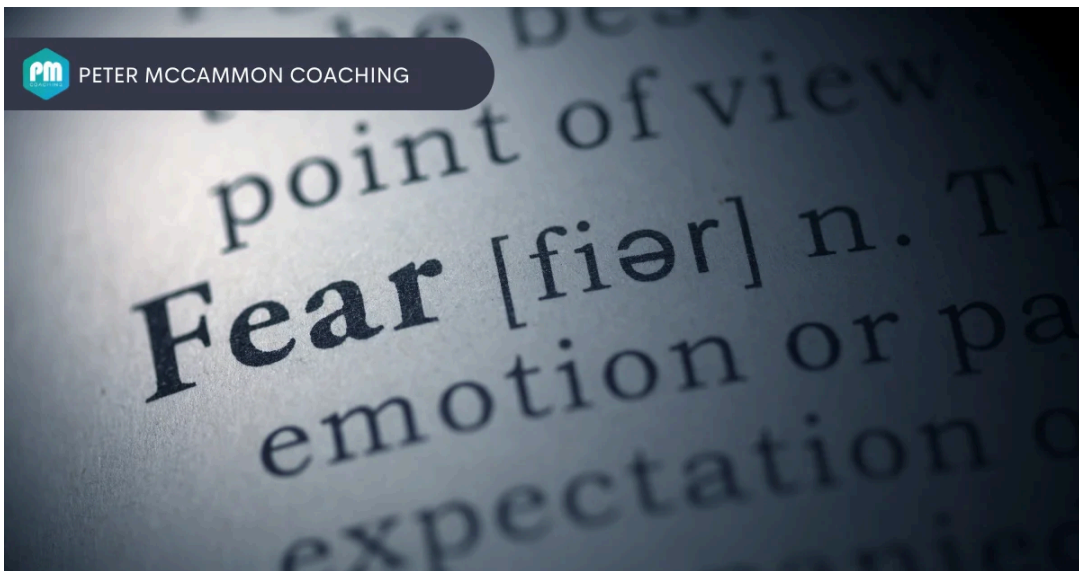




I Was Paralysed by Fear

Dear Reader

I was on a call with my coach last week and we were discussing a workshop I wanted to run. I had a clear idea about what I wanted to do and how it would look. As often happens, Ankush challenged me to think a bit bigger; to go beyond what I thought was possible. Usually, I can rise to the challenge, usually the challenge adds to my excitement about whatever it is we are discussing. This was one of those times when it was different.

One thing I have learned about myself, is that there can be a fine line between excitement that leads me to grow and fear that paralyses me. I can be excited about trying something new, something beyond what I have done before, something that feels like it will stretch me. It's almost like there is a perfect amount of emotional activation that can have me energised about moving forward, about taking a risk. In fact, when I challenge myself to repeatedly grow in this way, I love it! Ankush calls it 'ceiling to floor'.

But for me there is a line that I sometimes cross in the area of stretching, growing or challenging myself where excitement becomes fear. I know I can tolerate and process a certain amount of fear, because my fearful feelings are always coming from fearful thoughts. If I am able to remember that and see that the thoughts that are creating my fearful narrative in any moment are just a made-up story, I can usually stay with the challenge.

In those moments I can change the story and get back to the other side of the line between fear and excitement. When I am able to do this, I am still within what I now know as my 'window of tolerance'. When I am in my 'window of tolerance' I can cope with highs and lows of emotional activation and still function. When I go outside my window of tolerance, I don't cope.

That's what happened on my call with Ankush. I didn't just cross that line where excitement became fear, I left it miles behind. My fear went from zero to one hundred in seconds. When this happens, the surge of emotion that runs through me feels so strong I just want to run. But I can't because either I'm frozen, like a deer in headlights or running scared and just wanting to get out of the situation, or sometimes I shift from one to the other. When I am frozen, it's like I can only think, but in a way that doesn't help. When I am running scared, I can only feel and my ability to think has left me.

Experiencing life like this results in a variety reactions. Sometimes I just stop taking action (that's the freeze). Sometimes I bail on commitments I have made. Sometimes I decide what had looked like a great idea was a terrible idea and back track or change my mind. Sometimes I get

angry and look for someone to blame. In this case it was Ankush. Sometimes it's all of the above.

In the past when I experienced surges in emotion like this, before I understood the idea of 'window of tolerance', the paralysis could last for days. Until I learned how to get back into my 'window of tolerance' either my body was in control, or my thinking was in control with little or no ability to think and feel at the same time. Nothing much positive happens from here. All I am focussed on is trying to escape feeling the way I feel or trying to think my way through the apparent crisis. Neither of these are very helpful. When I am outside my window, even my document doesn't help.

What I have learned to do is get myself slowed down enough emotionally to get back in my window of tolerance, back to a place of being able to think and feel at the same time. It's like being below the surface of the water in the swimming pool and knowing you can't breathe until you get your head above the surface. Sometimes I go for a walk. Sometimes I just focus on my breathing. Sometimes when I am aware enough, I talk to someone I trust. Sometimes it is a combination of things.

In this instance it was a combination of actions. Just breathing intentionally and going for a walk with my dogs got me back into my window. At this stage my document really helped. I also had a conversation with Ankush a couple of days later. I explained what had happened and he worked with me to reset the challenge in a way that left me feeling excited and got me back into action. Just one of the advantages of getting to work with an incredible coach.

The concept of the 'window of tolerance' has been really helpful for me. It is only occasionally now that I find myself outside my window and unable to think and feel at the same time. This is mainly because I can see the emotional spike coming and take action to avoid it. My 'window of tolerance' is much wider than it used to be, but when I find myself outside of it, I am much better at knowing how to get back inside more quickly.

The impact of having an awareness of this and some resources for when it happens has had a huge impact on lowering my stress and

worry levels over the last few years. From being someone who was almost always stressed and worried, I am now mostly fairly calm and peaceful. But not always. Thankfully I am better able to deal with it than I used to be.

This story feels a bit vulnerable. After all I'm a coach who was a therapist for 10 years. Surely, I have it all sorted out by now. Truth is, I am far from having things figured out. The work I have done on 'me' has changed me. I have a very different relationship with myself. I have a better understanding of who I am and where my experience of life comes from. But as Syd Banks once said, 'life is a contact sport' and sometimes the contact knocks me off course.

How does this idea of the 'window of tolerance' impact you? How wide is your window? How often do you find yourself outside of it? How long does it take you to get back inside it? If this is something that impacts you and you'd like things to be different, I may be able to help. Just ask.

Have a great week!

Peter



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