

113. Why you're afraid to take action

Vanessa 00:00

Welcome to the Empowered brain, the only podcast using science, psychology and coaching to help you rewire your brain and create a life you love with your host, Dr. Vanessa Calderon, a Harvard grad physician, master coach, and mother of two.

Hi, sweet friends. Welcome back to the podcast. So first of all, let me apologize. It's a little echoey. Today, the acoustics in the room where I am recording isn't fantastic. So thank you for bearing with me.

So we are talking about fear today how fear shows up for you and how it holds you back from taking action, and essentially doing the things you recall to do in life, how fear shows up for you. Now you might look at me, you might see my accomplishments, you might look at my CV, look at all my degrees. And you might think, wow, that girl is so brave, she does not have any fear. But that is not at all true, I still experience a ton of fear. I just tend to take more action than not. But I still experience a ton of fear.

For example, I'm still afraid to rest sometimes, because I'm afraid I haven't done enough. Where I'm afraid to do things that bring me joy just because they bring me joy because I'm afraid they're not productive enough. Or sometimes when my husband and kids are all home, like on the weekends, I'm afraid to take time by myself, because I'm afraid that people will think that I'm selfish. For a very long time, I was afraid to take risks in my business because I didn't want to fail and be judged as not being good enough. And I still sometimes am afraid to fully show up as me as the authentic mean, including all my spiritual gifts, because I'm afraid I won't be accepted and that I will be rejected. So you see sweet friends, fear shows up for all of us. And it shows up in so many different ways. Fear tries to be super sneaky, it can show up as you just procrastinating on something, telling yourself, I'll do it later, I'll do it after I finished cleaning or organizing.

It can show up as perfectionism. Like you can't get started yet. Until everything is perfect. Until all you've done all the research and you have a perfect outline, then you'll get started. It can show up as apathy, like good or No, I just don't care. Who cares. I'm just unmotivated. It can show up as imposter syndrome, where you don't think that you can start because you're not good enough, yet, you need another degree or another credential. Or it can show up as anxiety. Like I'm so afraid I'm so nervous. I'm just so stressed out. There are so many different ways that fear shows up. So what we're gonna do is today we're going to talk about why fear shows up. And then I'm gonna follow this episode up with a number of other episodes where we dive deep into each one of these different ways that fear shows up and talk about exactly how that shows up for you and what to do about it. Okay, so let's get started. Where does fear come from?

Okay, so I'm going to get a little nerdy on all of you. And I'm going to give you some science here, because as you all know, I am a scientist, and I love pathology and pathophysiology. I love knowing the why of where things come from. So I'm gonna break it down for you scientifically. So we have a part of

our brain, it's called the fear center, the amygdala. And that part of the brain gets triggered when we're feeling nervous when we're feeling unsafe. Now, they've done studies to show that we are essentially scanning the world around us every five to seven seconds, ensuring that we're safe. And if we're not safe, the amygdala gets triggered immediately.

So where did the amygdala come from, we are born with the amygdala, it's part of our brain. Now, if you think about why the human spirit, the human human beings are so resilient, why we've been able to continue to propagate for centuries and centuries and centuries, it's because of our really well-functioning stress response, our amygdala, our fear response. So it was essentially put there to keep you safe, to keep you from getting eaten by a wild animal, to keep you from getting kicked out of your tribe, to keep you in a place where you were going to continue to propagate, you were going to continue to live and you are going to continue to be able to further the species. So that is essentially where the fear response came from. You probably have heard that before. That the fear response turns on when for example, you're going to go speak in public and you get really nervous. Why? Because the fear response is turning on to tell you Hey, hold on. Don't go speak in public.

What if they don't like it and they reject you and they kick us out of the tribe and we freeze to death this winter? That's one example. What else? What else is the fear response turned on? It turns on for us for so many different reasons, every time we're gonna do something new or different. Okay, so most people understand the evolutionary response if they fear response, the evolutionary why? Now, I'm going to go into something that's a little bit deeper than just that. And this is really speaking to a lot of you that are listening that are women and women of color. Okay, and not just you, everybody listening. So here it is. The truth is that a lot of the fear that we are now experiencing goes so much deeper than just our evolutionary response of fear, that evolutionary response of fear that affects everybody. But for many women, women of color, and other people that have come from marginalized communities, we experience fear, at a different level.

Because it's been passed down to us from generation to generation, we are essentially still experiencing what was unsafe for our ancestors. So for example, if you use like, think about your ancestors, think about the women that came like hundreds of years before you. What would happen to them, if they spoke up? What would happen to them if they spoke out of turn? What would happen to them if someone thought that they were too loud, or too smart? Or if they thought that they were too good included that they were too good for the tribe? What would happen to them? For many of them, they would experience physical abuse, they would experience sexual abuse, they would experience mental abuse. So what did they do? Instead, they would stay quiet, they would try to conform, and they would try to do what they thought was going to keep them from getting hurt from being unsafe. So if you've ever heard someone say to you, or you've heard this in your family, who do you think you are? Or you're too big for your britches? Where do you think that comes from?

All of that is inherited from our past ancestors, that that was taught to the elders in your life, and that was taught to them and they learned it from somewhere else. So what happens when we experience stress, so let's say I'm just going to use my great-grandmother, for example, when my great-grandmother would experience any fear for speaking up, or for not having dinner on time, or for trying to stand up to her husband if she didn't think she was treated fairly. When she would get, for

example, physical abuse or mental abuse, she started experiencing all of that, and the genes in her body started to change. So what would happen is her DNA was the same, but there's something called epigenetics, which is how the genes were expressed.

So her genes started to be expressed differently, she started to inherit a complex trauma response, and her genes started to be expressed differently. Now, when she was then pregnant with my grandmother, those genes and the way they were expressed were passed down to my grandmother. So my grandmother is still holding on to this trauma that my great-grandmother experienced, even though she hasn't experienced any of it at all, which means her genes are now being expressed differently, which means to show flinch when she hears a loud noise, or even though she's totally safe, or she'll be nervous to speak up, even though she hasn't experienced the trauma herself. So now, if my grandmother doesn't solve that, and then is also experiencing that same type of trauma is experiencing that same exact thing.

Now those genes are then getting passed on to my mother. And then my mother, the same thing will pass them on to me. So what are some examples of this? So you may have already just from hearing my stories, come up with your own examples. But let's talk about some examples. So some examples of how this shows up could be racialized, complex trauma. So let's say you grew up in a place where there was a strong belief in the white dominant culture or white supremacy. Or maybe you grew up in a place where it wasn't safe to live on the color of your skin if you're stopped by the police. So then what happens whenever you see a police car, even though nothing has ever happened to you, when you see a police car or hear sirens, your body may immediately tense up. Now, let's say that I'm gonna give you a different example. I'm going to use the example of materialism. So no, this one affects so many of us, especially high-achieving women.

Let's say that you grew up in a home where somebody in your family experienced the Great Depression, for example, not you, not even your parents, but maybe your grandparents. So what did they do? Their genetics started to be there, there's their cells started to be expressed differently, where they were literally afraid that if they didn't work hard, they wouldn't have enough to eat, they wouldn't have a safe place to sleep, that their heat, they wouldn't be able to have heat for their homes and their children may get sick, or potentially freeze to death. So what did they do, they were always working, always working really hard, always overworking because it was literally unsafe to not do that. Now, if you grew up with immigrants, as a child of immigrants, you might experience something very similar.

So if somewhere in your lineage, you had low socio-economic income, where you were somewhere in your lineage, somebody was always struggling to work really hard to provide safety and security for their family, that may have gotten passed down to you. And even though you don't experience that now, you might still be carrying along a lot of the ways those genes are expressed. By having a really tough time resting. By having a really tough time giving your body what it needs. Sometimes when it just needs to sleep, you might have fear or concern that you're not doing enough. And again, a lot of that comes from this idea that if we were already behind if we slow down, we'll get more behind. Or we're we already don't have enough, if I slow down, it will become dangerously unsafe for me in my family.

So that's another example of how these epigenetics continue to be passed down from generation to generation to generation. And here's another one, that's a really common one and a big one, especially if you're a woman. And that's sexism, or the oppressive nature of the patriarchy, which oftentimes will hold you back. And instead of speaking up, for example, if you are in a room of men, now I can create an entire thesis statement on the oppressive nature of the patriarchy. So I'm just briefly going to go over it here. Another big one that the patriarchy shows up for women, especially women of color, is whenever you want to do anything that centers you, if you want to rest, if you want to take time for yourself if you want to pursue a passion project, just because there's something inside of you calling you to do it.

The oppressive nature of the patriarchy will show up and say, Hey, why are you being selfish? Why are you doing that? So I grew up in a Latina home. And there we met the machismo culture, which is just another word for the patriarchy, and Spanish, essentially. And in the machismo culture, you were considered very selfish, just like a patriot, and in patriarchy, very selfish, if you ever did anything to center yourself. And I have had students tell me that it's hard for them to follow their dreams, or to pursue a project because they're so afraid they're going to be judged as selfish, or that they're going to be isolated, that people will, will start thinking that they're too good for everybody else. So depending on how you were raised, what you saw going on around you, and the genes that were passed down to you, you will continue to experience a lot of the same things, a lot of the same complex trauma now getting passed down to you.

Another big one for the patriarchy is the way women were valued. Or given their sense of worth, right, which was by itself, sacrificing, the more they sacrifice themselves, the better mothers they were, the better wives they were, the better Christians they were. So again, if you find it hard right now, take time for yourself, to follow a dream. If you find it hard, because you have children at home and you're trying to work and you feel guilty or you feel like you're not enough, all of that is coming from something that's been passed down from generation to generation to generation on to you. This trauma, again, was experienced by our ancestors, it affected the way their genes were expressed, which was then passed down through the womb to the fetus as the next fetus was being developed. Now, here's the thing about epigenetics.

Epigenetics does not change the gene itself. The DNA is exactly the same. It just changes the way that the cell is being expressed. And the reason why that is so fascinating and wonderful is because it means that the way our cells are being expressed is now usable. It can be changed, it can be changed for the worse. For example, if we're experiencing complex trauma, we start expressing ourselves differently. However, when we do our work, and we heal that trauma, it can also be changed for the better, it only takes one generation to change the way that gene is expressed. This means that, for example, if I was born with the epigenetics of complex trauma, which I was, by the way, if I was born like that, and I did my own internal healing work, and I processed, I don't have to pass that on to the next generation, which means after me, that's it.

The generational trauma ends. So it doesn't get passed on to my son or my daughter, and they don't pass it on to their kids. And that is the beauty of how malleable epigenetics can be. It's really powerful when you do your own internal healing work, and you change the way your genes are expressed. And

then you no longer have to pass these things down to the next generation. Imagine what would be possible if the next generation wasn't born with the same fears you had if you had a daughter that was not afraid to speak up in a room of men. If you had a daughter who wasn't afraid to take time to rest, because she knew that's what her body needed. If you had a daughter who wasn't afraid to be a mother, and also be incredibly successful at work, she didn't have that association of being selfish or not being enough in one place or the other. If you raised a child of color that wasn't afraid of the police, they didn't have to tense up.

They were smart, they were responsible, but they didn't have bodies and didn't have to experience that same stress and same tenseness imagine what would that would be like. Okay, so how do we do this work? It's a big question I always get, I want to heal, how do I do the healing, I don't want to pass this on to the next generation. I don't want to keep passing this off. So if you are serious about doing this work, I'm going to give you a few things that you can do on your own now. And I'm also going to invite you to join my program, it's called the Journey because this is exactly what we're doing inside of the program.

The journeys for high achieving women, women who are really smart and ambitious, who want to do more in their life without stress. And without burnout. The journey takes away, it teaches you how to like to heal all of these things, and takes away all of those barriers that have been getting in your way of achieving your life's purpose. That's what we do inside the journey. The journey is a movement, where we are creating these strong ambitious women who aren't afraid, who are healing, who aren't afraid of the patriarchy, who are really taking their rightful place in the world. It's a really beautiful place, and I invite you to join us inside.

Okay, so I want to now talk to you and teach you a little bit about how you can start doing this work for yourself right now. So the very first thing I want you to do is I want you to acknowledge that you're probably holding on to some of this complex trauma. If you are a person of color, you probably are holding on to some of the racialized trauma. And if you're a woman, you're probably also holding on to a lot of the trauma that comes from the oppressive nature of the patriarchy, I have yet to meet a woman who has not been affected by that. So the very first thing you need to do is you need to acknowledge, even though you've never realized it, even though you haven't been aware of it, you haven't been present to it. I want you to acknowledge that it's possible that it exists for you too. And now what I want you to do is I want you to take a second and ask yourself, How does my body let me know when I'm not feeling safe? What is your body do? How does it let you know when you're not feeling safe? For me, I get this incredible discomfort in the pit of my stomach. I just get really uncomfortable in the pit of my stomach. What does it feel like for you?

Now this is really important. So I don't want you to skip this part. I don't want you to let your ego tell you. I just don't know. Or do I already know all of this. I don't need to be doing this. I have already noticed. I want you to really pause and ask yourself. How does my body let me know when I'm not feeling safe? And the reason why this matters so much is because your body is reacting even before your brain has had a chance to fully process what is going on. Your body is reacting so quickly because again remember, your fear response again is hardwired. It can I'm within your amygdala. And if you are getting that triggered, that is acting before your brain has had a chance to process that something is

going on. And sometimes the only cue we have is that we feel a sensation in our bodies, we feel something in our bodies.

So I want you to again, take a second right now. And I want you to just check in with yourself, how does your body let you know when you're not safe? When you're not feeling safe? Again, that's going to be the first cue to let you know that something has gone wrong. So once you can practice that, and once you're aware of that, once you're present to what your body does, you can then do this next part. And here's the next part. Next time you're about to take action on something, and you notice that discomfort you notice that feeling that shows up for you, you're going to pause, and you're going to take a moment to just notice the feeling. A lot of the time we want to rush through that we don't want to notice because it feels uncomfortable. And when you avoid it, oftentimes you start taking actions that are unintentional.

You go in you eat something to not feel more comfortable, where you go, and you watch Netflix, so you don't have to feel that discomfort. Or you go on social media and you start scrolling through social media. Instead, what I want you to do is just be present to that discomfort, just notice it. And then I want you to take a second and notice what you're afraid of. And the way you do that is by asking yourself, What am I afraid of? And how might have this been unsafe for my ancestors? How might this have been unsafe for my ancestors? So I want you to try that for yourself. And just notice what comes up for you when you're doing that. This is the first step to doing a lot of this healing work is noticing what's happening to your body, and giving your body what you need, when that comes up for you. And noticing why. And you might not think you have the right answers when you ask yourself, How is this unsafe for my ancestors?

But what I want you to do is I want you to trust yourself. In that instance, whatever comes up for you trust that that was the right thing that was supposed to come up. And I'll share this one other thing with you, which is this, you may have heard the quote, I am my ancestors, wildest dreams. I am my ancestors, wildest dreams. If this is the first time you're hearing it, I want you to take that and hold on to it because it is the truth. You are your ancestors, wildest dreams. When I think about that, I think about the generations of women that came before me that were sacrificed to God, for example, I think way back to my Aztec and Mayan roots, and the virgins that would get sacrificed to a God. And I think way back to, you know, the fact that women weren't allowed to go out and go on Team women weren't allowed to go out and leave the tribe, that women were forced to stay and they were forced to bear children even if they didn't want to. That they had physical trauma, sexual trauma, mental trauma, that they were forced to deal with all of that. And I think about today and the gifts I've been given, I've been given courage. I've been given freedom. I've been given liberation.

I've been given the ability to say in my own family, decide when I want to have children. When I think about all that, I remind myself how sitting here today, speaking into this microphone, how I am in fact my ancestors, wildest dreams, and so are you. And when you choose action over fear, guess what you're doing? You are practicing courage. And courage is a gift. It's a gift that was bestowed upon you, by the women, by your ancestors, by the people that came before you. They were not able to practice courage all the time because their lives would be in danger. But you have the ability to practice courage today.

And when you choose action over fear, and you choose to practice courage, you are making your ancestors even more proud. You are blowing up this life that you have been given in all of the right ways. And that my friends is my wish to you that you choose action over fear. More than you choose fear over action that you make your ancestors more and more proud of you every time you do that, you choose to practice courage. And then you go out and you blow up this life that you were given in all of the right ways. Okay, sweet friends, go out there, take action, and know that you are being lifted up by all of them. who came before you? I love you all and I will see you next week

Hey, sweet friends, if you love what you're learning, then you've got to join us on the journey. It's my all-inclusive program and the best community out there giving you the education you never knew you needed to help you create a life you love. Join us at VanessaCalderonmd.com/join. I'll see you there.