

Fear Play



In honor of October's traditional end of month celebration of Halloween... What is Fear play, and why do some crave it? This is what we'll be exploring. As always, the writing is not meant to be exhaustive or definitive, but to provide those exploring BDSM and alternative lifestyles some guidance and information so they may continue learning on their own.

Overview of Fear play

Fear Play is a form of psycho-emotional S&M involving the use of Fear to illicit powerful emotional responses from our primal survival mechanisms (i.e. fight/flight response). Because fear play often treads into dangerous and fragile territories, it is considered a type of Edge Play – meaning BDSM activities that push people to the edge of their limits or capacities.

While there are many kinds of fear play, the one thing they have in common is that they test one's emotional resiliency – be you top or bottom. As the bottom one must face the likelihood that confessions and weaknesses will be turned against you. As the top one will have to draw upon sometimes uncomfortably dark aspects of the self and realize that once

you connect with your shadow in that fashion there is no going back.

Kinds of fear play scenes include exploiting better known fears that the bottom has expressed, challenging areas of discomfort, and those that will likely test for lesser known fears or uncover traumatic experiences (whether intentional or not). The risk is therefore to not just one person, but to all involved, as well as to the health of the relationship itself. What fear play can invoke often challenges prior matters of trust. As such, these scenes will certainly stress the relationship and its development if rushed or handled careless in any way – and sometimes, even then, things can potentially go sideways with irrevocably damaging results.

Why

The reasons people engage in fear play is as diverse as the lifestyle and its community. That said, we're going to explore a few very common themes regarding fear play and how they are sometimes put into motion.

Adrenaline Rush

Perhaps the most common element behind fear play is the same as the reason behind the popularity of horror movies, theme park rides, haunted houses, and certain extreme sports – it's the thrill of the *adrenaline rush*. Activities that involve higher degrees of perceived risk (be the risk real or illusory) are activating our primal response mechanism. A function of the amygdala, the brain is flooded with neurochemicals to aid in survival. There are about thirty various hormones released – most notably adrenaline, dopamine, endorphins, serotonin, cortisol, etc. The effect is often heightened senses, speed, strength, racing heart, clearer breathing, etc.

However, what we are usually doing is experiencing the high

of *excitement* rather than actual fear (or terror). This is because the actual risk is fairly marginal through highly controlled environment or situation. As a result the experience feels more dangerous than it actually is (or else folks wouldn't repeat it). When the margin of risk exceeds our sense of safety we experience genuine fear. Our Risk/Reward model has tipped and our "terror tolerance" diminishes as the survival instinct forces a reaction to avoid or escape the risk. See my posts on the [Nature of Fear](#) for a more detailed examination of fear itself.

Relief & Accomplishment

Another fairly common reason to seek fear is the sense of relief and accomplishment after experiencing something challenging. Relief is very much a high in and of itself which often accompanied by a temporary mania, high energy, laughing or giggling fits, lightness of mood, and a sense of confidence or invulnerability. The release from the grip of fear is due in part to the initial ebbing levels of adrenaline and normalizing heart rate while still energized and enjoying the natural high from dopamine and endorphins. In essence, you can enjoy the experience now the risk is lower than the reward.

Another benefit is the realization that one has overcome a fear, pushed through with willpower or determination, and accomplished a goal. Making through the other end of the House of Horrors can be a heady experience for many. It is that same sense of combined relief and accomplishment seeking that can fuel the drive to challenge oneself, push personal limits, and enduring difficult experiences. In many ways, the sense of accomplishment is acknowledging ones new competency and return of control.

Excitement & Priming

A study performed by psychologist Arthur Aron published a study showing how a fearful experience alters one's sense of attraction and increases sexual attraction (Dutton, D. G.; Aron, A. P.; "Some evidence for heightened sexual attraction under conditions of high anxiety"; Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; 1974). It's then little wonder why popular dating experiences feature shared exhilaration. There is a priming during the adrenaline rush of horror movies, roller coasters, and other types of shared thrill seeking. This is essentially a confusion or misattribution of excitement or arousal – taking the experience from one state (fear) and attributing it to the experience of lust/attraction (White, G; Fishbein, S; Rutsein, J; "Passionate love and the misattribution of arousal"; Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; 1981).

The ability to confuse intense feelings of excitement can take several forms, such as mistaking the fight/flight response for intense sexual attraction. Consider the experience of intense passion born out of a couple's heated argument or fight in "make up sex". Moreover, this error of transference can work both ways. One example may be the sudden arousal of lust triggering fight/flight responses, resulting in anxiety or panic attacks. This also provide rationale behind the tendency for those new to the lifestyle to suddenly fall in love with a casual scene partner. The intensity and excitement experienced in a good scene is mistaken for the more profound emotions of love and romantic desire.

Bonding / Connection

Going through a shared experience in survival situations (real or manufactured) builds intense and enduring memories and strengthen social ties. As mentioned before, the hormones released in fear response play a substantial role in both short and long-term impacts on our behavior, memory,

and perspectives. One key hormone, oxytocin or “the love hormone”, is one of those released and is attributed with being a key factor in the strength of social and interpersonal bonds when facing traumatic experiences (Olf, M.; “Bonding after trauma: on the role of social support and the oxytocin system in traumatic stress”; Eur J Psychotraumatol; 2012). It is this very phenomena that is exploited during hazing and other trials of hardship – forcing team cohesion by invoking psycho-emotional fear responses which cement your social support structures.

An important consideration is that the bond can form without having to experience the same trauma or be present at the same time. Rather, the act of recounting the experience, and thus bringing the memory to the present, is enough to create intense emotional responses during the event flashback. This is the same principle utilized by support groups, where the emotional vulnerability and fear creates interpersonal bonds and thus often helps those struggling with feelings of isolation or loneliness.

Examples



Typical examples of fear play use the most common elements of the Bottom’s fears against them, focusing on psycho-emotional

sadism rather than physical sadism. The Top is engaging in a mind-fuck by subjecting the Bottom to their fears, or by creating an illusory experience of those fears. Some practical or physical fear exposures may include immobilization, small enclosed spaces, needles or sharp instruments, water or fire, etc. Other examples may exploit fears based on atmosphere and presence, such as a multitude of shadows, surrounding whispers, complete silence or deafening noise, etc. One can create scenes in cooperation with a co-Top, such the fear of Clowns, school bullies, street thug or kidnapping. When it comes to fear play it really is up to the imagination.

Fear based scene examples:

Nightmares – creating a scene based on the bottom's nightmares. Also using elements from a horror movie or artwork, such as the films Hellraiser, or the art work from Brom, Dorian Cleavenger, and others. A scene of this type is more about the level of Excitement some fear can produce.

Mummification – using pallet wrap to fully immobilize the bottom including over face (providing straws for nose and mouth breathing. This kind of scene is more about Accomplishment, enduring the fear and triumphing over it.

Fear of Being Cut – using a frozen plastic edge to create the illusion of a sharp knife, and using warm massage oil or liquid Dawn to create the illusion of running blood. Top acts in a panicked way to clean up the wound, call for help, etc. This kind of scene is more of the straight up mind-fuck and even Bonding/Connection if handled well as a collective effort to “address the problem together, without panicking”

Clowns – using a circus themed setting and implements for a scene where someone dressed as a clown is assisting or co-topping. Personally, I like the idea of blending Danny

Elfman's Joker, Beetlejuice, and Stephen King's "It". This scene is about pushing the limits, testing how far it takes one to go from Excitement to Terror and the Bottom's breaking point.

Caution

Any fear the Bottom has becomes a possible tool in the sadist's repertoire. It should go without saying that fear play requires *exceedingly careful negotiation* regarding the scope and limits of the scene. It cannot be emphasized enough that fear play often involves testing or pushing limits *without* harming or causing lasting damage to the person's psyche. However, there is always the risk that harm may be experienced, and both Top and Bottom will need to work together closely to heal and address any damage caused.

It's also important to remember that the world experienced by the Bottom is in THEIR mind, and so any feelings and trauma experienced is completely theirs and cannot be judged, minimized, or dismissed. The Top absolutely **MUST** have trust that their Bottom is being open and honest **AND** take any feedback from a fear play session at face value. If your first reaction is to excuse, defend, or shift any responsibility from yourself then fear play is not for you.

As mentioned before, fear play is edge play – so the utmost care and caution must be observed from start to finish. This is a high risk activity with the potential for considerable psycho-emotional damage if not taken seriously and carefully. Do **NOT** let bravado or ego motivate you, do not rush into it, do not "wing it" and hope things turn out well. When engaging in any kind of edge play, it's never a matter of **IF** something will go wrong but rather **WHEN**, as well as how badly and how all those involved handle the issue.

If you take your time, play thoroughly, and keep communication open, one can find much exhilaration in fear play that few

other forms can offer.

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