

Living with Uncertainty: Fear of Losing Control (i)

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Seeking control is part of being human. Every one of us wants to be the one steering our own life. It is part of survival. It comes from our beliefs that if we can make choices, we can protect ourselves. If we hold on to control, we can guard ourselves against uncertainty. If we stay in control, we can be safe.

Imagine you are driving a car. You want to keep your hands firmly on the steering wheel, deciding when to turn, brake or accelerate. If someone suddenly grabs the steering wheel from you, you will feel anxious, unsafe and powerless.

That's what happens in real life too. When people feel like they are losing control, whether over their emotions, their choices or their environment, it triggers fear. This fear is basically our brain saying, "Wait, I don't know where this is going. There is too much uncertainty. I need to be in the driver's seat. I want to be in control. I need to be in charge."

The fear of losing control is very common. We see it in the behaviours of people around us. But we often don't recognise it as that. We mislabel it as personality quirks, the lack of experience, propriety or wisdom.

Have you seen, for instance, parents worrying that if they don't oversee every detail of their child's routine, things will spiral into chaos?

Driven by this fear, they begin micromanaging — constantly checking, correcting, dictating and hovering over their children. It may be over their homework, meals, bedtime etc. even when they are capable of handling tasks independently. The parents' anxiety keeps them holding on too tightly, leaving little room for autonomy or self-regulation.

Have you worked with managers who feel that if they don't control every aspect of a project, others will make mistakes? This anxiety over losing their grip on things leads them to avoid delegation, causing them to pile all responsibilities onto themselves. The result is stress, exhaustion and a team that never learns to grow.

Fear, at its core, is a survival instinct. When fear stays within healthy limits, it is not an enemy but a guide. It alerts us to danger, sharpens our awareness, and motivates us to act with caution. In many ways, fear acts like a built-in compass, steering us away from harm and toward safety.

Think of the times fear has helped you. You slow down on a wet road because you don't want to lose control of the car. You study harder because you fear failing an exam. Or you pause before saying something harsh in an argument because you fear damaging a relationship. Each of these is a normal response to reasonable fear. In each case, fear is doing its job — protecting, motivating and encouraging discipline.

This is the healthy side of fear. It doesn't paralyse us; it keeps us alert. It doesn't cage us; it sets guardrails so we don't veer into reckless territory. When balanced, fear becomes a quiet ally, reminding us to act wisely without taking away our freedom.

Fear does not only arise in moments of danger or challenge. Sometimes, what unsettles us most is the possibility of losing our grip on life itself. Life is uncertain, and it is this uncertainty that fuels fear, especially the fear of losing control.

We worry about choices — making the wrong career move, choosing a partner or deciding whether to live with in-laws, because each decision carries unknown consequences. They could alter the course of our lives. They could cause us to be thrown out of our driver's seat.

We guard our relationships. We are anxious that a friend might drift away. We fear that a spouse's affection might fade or that conflict could fracture the bonds we depend on. We can't stop worrying that those connections might not last.

In each of these areas, the fear of losing control is not about physical harm but about the unsettling uncertainty that threatens the structures that give us our stability, identity and belonging. This is the fear of losing control — the sense that if we don't hold on tightly, chaos will take over. Unlike fear of a predator or an accident, this fear is subtler yet it can shape our behaviour just as powerfully.

Connect-Point



*Fear is a watchful companion, but never meant to be the driver of our lives.
(unknown)*

Fear is meant to protect us. Unfortunately, it can grow out of proportion and become unchecked. When it does, it can begin to dominate our lives. The fear of losing control, once a helpful compass, can turn into a cage. Instead of guiding us toward safety, it dictates our choices, limits our freedom and strains our relationships. This is when fear becomes unhealthy or pathological.

Unhealthy fear of losing control often shows up in subtle but destructive ways.

Do you know of people who suffer from obsessive compulsive disorder? Their compulsions in the form of repetitive behaviours (washing, checking, counting etc.) are ways to “take back control”. The compulsions become rituals to curb the anxiety caused by obsessive thoughts such as — “If I don't wash my hands, germs will contaminate them.” “If I don't check my stove, my house will be burnt down.” The ritual itself becomes a way to cling to control, even when it consumes time and energy.

Then there are others who create strict schedules or rules for themselves and others, believing that any deviation will lead to chaos. What begins as structure turns into rigidity, leaving little room for spontaneity or growth.

Some others suffer from avoidance of opportunities. Fear can cause these people to avoid situations where outcomes are uncertain. They turn down promotions, refuse social invitations or avoid travel. The avoidance feels safe, but it gradually shrinks their world.

Another common pathology is decision paralysis. Faced with choices, a person may become stuck, fearing that the “wrong” decision will spiral out of control. They delay, overthink or refuse to decide at all, leaving life on hold.

In each case, the fear of losing control no longer protects. It imprisons. It narrows life, erodes confidence, and can even contribute to anxiety disorders or depression. What was once a survival instinct becomes a source of suffering.

Recognising the fear of losing control is the first step toward loosening its grip. Fear itself is not the enemy. It is a signal, a messenger pointing to what matters most to us. But when fear begins to dictate our every move, it robs us of the very freedom we are trying to protect.

The challenge, then, is not to eliminate fear but to reframe our relationship with it. We can learn to notice when fear is guiding us wisely and when it is holding us hostage. By practising trust — trust in ourselves, in others, and in the natural unpredictability of life, we begin to release the need for absolute control.

In doing so, fear shifts from being a master to being a companion. It reminds us to be careful without keeping us captive. It nudges us toward growth without chaining us to rigidity.

Fear of losing control is natural. Keeping it moderated allows us to live with uncertainty without being ruled by it and by the negative consequences it brings about.



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