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The Only Thing You Need to Do to Overcome Fear, According to Neuroscience

By Mareo McCracken [🐦 @cmareoj](https://twitter.com/cmareoj) (<http://www.twitter.com/cmareoj>)*CREDIT: Getty Images*

Many business leaders pretend they are incredibly controlled, stoic (<https://www.inc.com/walter-simson/everybodys-suddenly-talking-about-this-ancient-leadership-practice.html>), and confident (<https://www.inc.com/mareo-mccracken/want-to-be-more-confident-5-leadership-habits-to-start-right-now.html>). The perceived ideal image is for them to show that they do not feel fear.

Truth? (<https://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/18-proven-ways-to-be-more-confident-and-poised.html>)

I have never met anyone that doesn't face fear.

Every day I don't know exactly what my team is going to do. I don't know what my clients are going to do. I don't know what my partners are going to do. I don't know what my future clients are going to do.

The biggest fear of all? I don't know if the actions I take will create the exact results that I want.

I am not alone.

Every single entrepreneur, leader, or executive, is afraid of something. That fear is always shown in behavior. It might be the tone of voice or the act of not taking action, or it might be shown in aggression towards a threat, no matter how it is shown, fear is real.

Everyone knows fear kills.

Fear kills opportunities, relationships, sales, product launches and employee morale.

Fear is formed when the mind focuses on the uncertainty of future outcomes. Confidence is the awareness of all the facts yet there is still a belief in a positive outcome no matter the uncertainty present.

The good thing is MIT research that shows you exactly how to overcome fear, even if that was not the point of the research, to begin with.

Earl Miller is a cognitive specialist and neuroscience professor at MIT, his research (http://ekmillerlab.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Attention-Please_-_Earl-Miller-Wants-to-Make-Us-All-Smarter_-_DiscoverMagazine.pdf) found that humans cannot focus on more than one thing at a time. Most of the application of his research has focused on our inability to multi-task and how to increase brainpower. Yet, when you understand that to feel fear you have to consciously think about it, then you can take the research and apply it to almost any situation. This does not apply to unconscious or instant fear, fear that is an emotion. This research applies to the main type of fear we feel daily which is conscious fear based on our expectations and perceptions.

Since our brains only can consciously focus on one thing at a time, once you are in the act of doing, your fear fades away. Therefore, taking action reduces conscious fear.

The first time I learned this was long before I heard of Earl Miller. I was living in Hong Kong and as a missionary, my main assignment was to talk to strangers and help them. I was scared. Through experience, I learned that while I was actually talking and actively listening, I was not afraid. I didn't know the science behind it, I just knew it worked for me. That same lesson of action overcoming fear has been repeated in every professional role I have held since.

Since fear paralyzes, how do you take action? The application of Professor Miller's research requires a somewhat unique approach to fear. That is where commitment comes in.

Commitments are not decisions, commitments are not preferences, commitments are not ideals. They are stronger and deeper, they are steadfast and immovable. Once you commit to something, nothing else matters.

If you want to take action, which will eliminate fear, the only thing you need to do is make a commitment. Why? Commitment means an action is taking place and your brain is focusing on something else besides the fear.

Commitment always leads to confidence; it is a cycle. Action creates success and success will create confidence. If you don't have confidence, take action, and the confidence will come because you will find success because you will not be thinking about fear.

All fear is neutralized when commitment is proven through action. This is how your brain works.

And, as an added bonus, when you are committed to something you don't need motivation.

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Bill Gates Just Declared This Optimistic Read His New Favorite Book of All Time



By Jessica Stillman [@EntryLevelRebel](https://twitter.com/EntryLevelRebel) (<http://www.twitter.com/EntryLevelRebel>)



CREDIT: Getty Images

Bill Gates may be known for his extreme focus (<https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/the-productivity-secret-behind-bill-gates-incredible-success.html>), but when it comes to books at least, the man's attention spins like a weather vane.

One month he's giving 50 of his friends a new novel (<https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/this-novel-is-so-good-bill-gates-gave-it-to-50-of-his-friends.html>) he adores, the next he's suggesting everyone get out the tissues and check out a heartbreaker of a memoir (<https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/bill-gates-says-this-is-the-best-non-fiction-book-hes-read-for-ages.html>), then a bit later he's back on his blog enthusing about a deep dive into eviction (<https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/bill-gates-every-american-who-lives-a-comfortable-life-should-read-this-book.html>) in America. The man clearly has both eclectic tastes and enthusiasm to spare.

So what's the Microsoft founder's latest book mania? This time he's really outdone himself in his excitement, declaring his latest find his "new favorite book of all time (<https://www.gatesnotes.com/Books/Enlightenment-Now>)."

The scientific case for radical optimism

The soon-to-be-released title is the latest from renowned Harvard linguist Steven Pinker (<https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/the-20-most-abused-words-in-the-english-language.html>), and it's not hard to see why the book appeals so much to Gates. Lately, the billionaire-turned-philanthropist has been using his popular blog (<https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/thought-2017-was-a-terrible-year-bill-gates-says-these-6-tweets-will-change-your-mind.html>) and even the pages of major magazines to argue for more optimism. The world, he insists, might seem like a total mess sometimes, but we're actually making steady progress making it a better place (<https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/bill-gates-here-are-5-reasons-to-be-optimistic-about-2018.html>) for all of us.

Pinker's new book, due out the end of February, presents the same idea, only supercharged with data and delivered in the popular writer's easy-to-digest style.

"For years, I've been saying Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature*

(https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0143122010/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0143122010&linkCode=as2&tag=inccom05-20&linkId=e612deb056afbdec393e069cfa43070) was the best book I'd read in a decade," writes Gates, who is clearly a long-time Pinker fan, but he continues, "his new book, *Enlightenment Now* (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0525427570/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0525427570&linkCode=as2&tag=inccom05-20&linkId=af2403ee6b01d81bfe285c6f56ed5f6a), is even better."

(https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0525427570/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0525427570&linkCode=as2&tag=inccom05-20&linkId=af2403ee6b01d81bfe285c6f56ed5f6a)

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"*Enlightenment Now* takes the approach he uses in *Better Angels* to track violence throughout history and applies it to 15 different measures of progress (like quality of life, knowledge, and safety). The result is a holistic picture of how and why the world is getting better. It's like *Better Angels* on steroids," Gates explains.

Don't be put off by this description. Just because the book is information-packed doesn't mean it's dull or requires a PhD to get through, Gates assures would-be readers that most people "will find it a quick and accessible read. [Pinker] manages to share a ton of information in a way that's compelling, memorable, and easy to digest," he claims. To prove his point, Gates lists a whole series of fascinating, optimism-boosting facts you'll learn in the book, including:

1. You're 37 times less likely to be killed by lightning than you were at the turn of the century.
2. Time spent doing laundry fell from 11.5 hours a week in 1920 to an hour and a half in 2014.

Less laundry, more hope

While I for one am absolutely thrilled about a reduction in time spent doing laundry (<https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/a-frustrated-father-has-invented-the-laundry-folding-robot-of-your-dreams.html>) (as it continues to feel like a treadmill of tedium today, I can only imagine the hours our grandparents wasted on the task), you could be excused for asking, who really cares? Sure these are fun factoids, but why do we need a book-length argument for optimism?

Journalist Rebecca Solnit has a great reply to this understandable question. "Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes," she has written (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/15/rebecca-solnit-hope-in-the-dark-new-essay-embrace-unknown>).

"Your opponents would love you to believe that it's hopeless, that you have no power, that there's no reason to act, that you can't win. Hope is a gift you don't have to surrender, a power you don't have to throw away," Solnit says.

If you're convinced that you could do with a little more hope and that Gates's new favorite book of all time could be a good way to get it, you can pre-order a copy here (https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0525427570/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0525427570&linkCode=as2&tag=incom05-20&linkId=e213aedfda3a57597b2d3c70e157c6ce).

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