



AuSM's highly trained, certified therapists have committed their careers to helping individuals with autism understand their diagnosis and address both the challenges and gifts that it can bring. The AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team sends out a monthly e-mail to answer questions submitted by the autism community. This is one of the past issues of the column. Visit www.ausm.org to sign up to receive the e-mails.

Dear Therapist:

I noticed I have been feeling scared a lot and I do not know what to do. I have tried to not let it bother me through ignoring it or telling myself to think more positively. But I still feel scared. What can I do to cope with fear?

– **Facing My Fear**

Dear Fear Facer:

A good first step is recognizing what you are feeling, which is scared. The harder part is accepting you feel scared instead of ignoring it. As humans, it is easier to tell ourselves to do something as opposed to not doing something. For example, do not think of a pink elephant. You probably thought of a pink elephant, right? In a similar manner, thinking of not being scared can increase scared feelings. Instead, it is better to notice and acknowledge your feelings. This process might look like this: "Okay, I am scared. This really sucks and I wish I did not feel like this. What can I do about it?"

I am glad you are trying to think positively, but sometimes that can be counterproductive. Phrases like "good vibes only," "always look on the bright side," or "it could be worse" may feel better to think initially, but can lead to invalidation. Maybe things could be worse, but you are still feeling scared. It can help to think in more neutral terms rather than making the leap from negative to positive. For example, "My brain is telling me I am scared. I may not know why I am scared. This is okay. I can cope with this by doing something comforting."

Here are some ways to cope with fear:

- Write it down. This helps with getting some of the fear out of mind and onto paper. What you do with the paper afterwards is up to you, such as throwing it away.



- **Grounding.** This means checking in with your surroundings in order to decrease fear, especially if you are thinking about something in the past. What are some things you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste (if applicable)?
- **Talking to someone you trust.** This can be a family member, friend, mental health professional, staff member, or someone you know who will listen. This can help with feeling less isolated and normalize your experiences.
- **Stimming.** If you have a favorite stim, definitely engage with it. This helps with providing a constructive way of shifting attention.
- **Using your special interest, if you have one.** Like stimming, this helps with diverting attention away from the fear and onto something else.
- **Change your environment, if possible.** This can be anything from cleaning and organizing to getting out of where you live for a while. If there's a place where you live that you don't often go, try being in that space. Creating a dedicated space to go to can help with coping with fear; sometimes just knowing about it decreases some of the fear. You can put stims or other things you like in this room so you will want to use it when the time comes and develop a positive connection with it.

I hope these suggestions will help with your fear. Take care!

– **Sara Lahti, MA, LPCC**
Therapist, Autism Society of Minnesota

If you would like to submit a question for the AuSM Counseling and Consulting Services team, please e-mail autismcounseling@ausm.org or contact us at 651.647.1083.