When
FEAR
Takes Over
Your Life

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Everyone feels afraid from time to time. But millions of people suffer from phobias—powerful fears that keep them from living normal lives.

For years, Kyle Hargreaves, 13, had a secret fear. It wasn’t of spiders or of heights. Kyle was afraid of mascots. That’s right—those costumed characters at sporting events and amusement parks. Just seeing a mascot caused Kyle anxiety. His heart would pound. He would sweat and have trouble breathing. Once, at a hockey game near his hometown in Pennsylvania, mascots caused him such distress that his dad thought he was having a stroke.

“What’s wrong with me?” Kyle wondered. He tried to control his fear, but he couldn’t. And as time went on, the problem only became worse.

**Vocabulary**
- **anxiety**: a feeling of worry or nervousness
- **irrational**: not based in reality; not making sense
- **hereditary**: passed down from parent to child before the child is born
- **triggered**: caused suddenly to happen
- **interact**: to talk or do something with another person or thing

**Total Terror**
Kyle suffered from maskophobia, a fear of mascots. More than 19 million Americans suffer from some kind of phobia [FOH-bee-uh]. A phobia is an extreme, irrational, and long-lasting fear of something.

When people with phobias see the thing they fear, they may panic, vomit, or even pass out. Scientists aren’t sure exactly what causes phobias. Some could be hereditary. Others could result from bad experiences. For instance, if a dog bites you, you might develop a fear of dogs.

**Fear vs. Phobia**
To understand phobias, you need to know about fear. Fear is caused by a reaction in the brain. When we see something that might be dangerous, like a snake, part of the brain tells us to react. So we jump back or break into a sweat.

Soon afterward, another part of the brain helps us decide what to do next.
If it's a real snake, it tells us to run away. If it's a stick that looks like a snake, it tells us to relax.

But being afraid is different from having a phobia. When a person has a phobia, fear is triggered by something even though the person knows it isn't threatening. And the feelings of terror don't go away. People with phobias often know their fear doesn't make sense. Yet they can't stop it.

**Don't Avoid It**

People with phobias go to extreme lengths to stay away from whatever it is that they fear. People who are afraid of small spaces may walk up 30 flights of stairs rather than step into an elevator. People who fear public places have been known to stay in their homes for years.

But avoiding what you are afraid of makes phobias worse, says Amit Etkin, a professor at Stanford University. If you don't interact with the thing that scares you, your brain will never accept that it's harmless.

**Facing Fear**

Soon after the hockey game, Kyle decided to conquer his fear. His dad took him to a clinic, where Kyle was treated with a method called exposure. In that type of treatment, a patient is forced to face the object of his fear step-by-step.

First, a man carrying a bunny costume appeared. Kyle started to panic, but he didn't run away. Next, the man put on the whole costume except for the head. Then he played basketball with Kyle. After a while, the man put on the head. Other mascots joined the game.

Kyle was nervous every step of the way. But eventually he relaxed. By the end of the day, his fear was gone. To prevent his phobia from returning, Kyle interacted with mascots several times for a month.

To celebrate Kyle's new fear-free relationship with mascots, his family went on a trip. Where did they go? To a place full of mascots—Disney World!

—Matthew Hutson
In Search of Fear

In this retelling of a Turkish folktale, a boy wants to know what fear feels like. He finds out that fear can appear when you least expect it.

Once, there was a boy who had never felt fear. He wanted to know what it was like to be afraid. "I will go out and find fear," he declared one night.

Soon he saw a gang of robbers seated around a campfire. He knew the men were dangerous. But he was prepared, so he wasn’t afraid.

"Can you show me what fear is?" the boy asked.

One of the robbers said, "Take these ingredients. Go into that cemetery and make us a meal."

The boy knew the cemetery might be scary. Because he was ready, he was not afraid. As he made the food, a hand suddenly reached up from one of the graves.

Very calmly, the boy pushed the hand away and finished his job. The boy still didn’t know what fear was.

Finally, he came upon the palace of a queen. He told her all about his journey to find fear.

"I know just how to show this boy what fear feels like," the queen said to herself. She gave her cook special instructions.

That night the boy had dinner at the palace. As he lifted the lid from his soup bowl, a bird flew out. It was so unexpected that the boy jumped back screaming.

"And that," said the queen, "is what fear feels like."

—Nicole Tocco

Finding Fear

Over the next few days, the boy came across many things that would have scared most people. But he went into each situation so prepared to feel fear that he never actually did. It seemed that nothing could scare the boy.

Compare and Contrast

Use this text and the article “When Fear Takes Over Your Life” to answer the questions. Write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

1. How was Kyle Hargreaves’s fear different from the fear experienced by the boy in the folktale? Use examples from both texts to support your answer.

2. Which do you think would be worse—having a phobia like Kyle did or almost never being able to feel fear like the boy in the folktale? Why?