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PO Box 121  
Botsford, CT 06404  
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888.426.4712

**FROM FEAR TO FAITH: HELPING CLIENTS MOVE FROM  
NATURAL TO SUPERNATURAL**

**By: Corey A. Mettler**

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**From Fear to Faith:  
Helping Clients Move from Natural to Supernatural**

Corey A. Mettler MA, LLPC  
Domestic Infant Adoption Specialist  
Bethany Christian Services

## **The Function of Fear**

Fear is a significant issue in the fields of Mental Health, Social Work and Counseling. It often proves to be the root of significant anger issues, anti-social behavior, personality disorders, and is closely linked with chronic shame. Fear shapes behavior in many observable ways and often results in deep distress even for clients who have demonstrated basically healthy coping skills. Fear has been and will continue to be a major consideration when working in the helping professions. In working with adoptive families, fear remains an issue that requires addressing throughout the process. The information that follows is designed to help workers and clients alike make sense of the effect that fear can have on behavior and to share the hope that is found throughout scripture in countering that fear.

According to psychoanalytic theory, fear (used here synonymously with anxiety) is a state of tension that motivates us to action. It is a protective instinct, the self-preservation function of our natural bodies. The function of fear is to warn of a perceived, impending danger. Sources of fear can be framed in three ways according to Freud: in the external world (reality anxiety), or in our internal conflicts (moral and neurological anxiety). Moral anxiety is generally understood to be the struggle between right and wrong and is often associated with religion and organized belief. Neurological anxiety is far more scattered and refers to inner conflict that isn't necessarily logical, but has a subconscious link. Clients may be struggling with fear and anxiety from any of these sources. Regardless, the original function of fear/anxiety was to strive to protect, but much of the time it actually serves to inhibit. (Corey, 2001)

Freud's observations and conclusions about the function of fear as described above appear also to be confirmed in scripture with practical application. Look at the account of the ushering in of sin in the world in the book of Genesis:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (Genesis 3:6-13)

It stands to reason that with the fall of humanity, the entrance of sin into the world, and the presence of death (previously unknown), fear immediately manifested itself as Adam and Eve hid in the garden. A cycle of behavior begins. There was immediate awareness of "wrongness" or moral anxiety. The first action taken was to hide and before long Adam and Eve were trying to justify their behavior and blame one another. God, of course, responds within his nature by rejecting sin and allowing the consequences of natural law to take effect, accompanied by what eventually will become death, a natural force and a great example of what could be described as reality anxiety.

In this original example, fear starts as a response to the negative event of disobedience. Scripture does not point this out directly, but it can be reasoned that the shame Adam and Eve experienced was a reaction to not only their sudden awareness of their bodies, but more importantly, their disobedience. What was described as shame in

the scriptures is closely associated with the fear of what God had promised: Death. They knew that they had sinned and their fear moved immediately to action. They covered themselves out of shame, separating themselves from one another. When they heard the Lord in the garden, they hid themselves from the presence of God as well. As their negative behavior compounds, we recognize that fear is creating a pattern.

## **The Cycle of Fear**

The patterns of behavior that accompany fear tend to be consistently experienced. They form a cycle that can replay in our lives repeatedly and simultaneously. Fear starts with a *triggering event or perception*. The event may have been directly experienced by the individual or it may be part of his or her perception of the experience of others. In working with adoptive families, the fears that tend to present themselves are: fears of the unknown, fear of further loss, fear of the lack of control, and fear of failure. The source of the fear rarely matters; it is how the client moves to processes the trigger that determines the direction of the cycle.

When the fear cycle is engaged, internal processing will result in *negative expectations*. A triggering thought or event moves forward into developing thoughts and previously formed perceptions. These may be consciously practiced or subconsciously present. Negative expectations have the power to deeply entrench fears and lead to the physical consequences of fear and anxiety. The practice of habitual thought patterns that create negative expectations rarely contain truth or come to fruition. Therefore the secondary effect of negative expectations is in wasting a great deal of time and emotional energy. Negative expectations will continue to move a client into more physical symptoms and negative action.

The negative thought patterns described above progress into *physical responses* both in biological symptomology and in the motivation to action. The physically observable responses to fear are well documented. Increases in heart rate and blood pressure, and quickened breathing are common. Adrenaline and cortisol are released, producing energy and blocking the brain from sensing pain. Blood flows away from your heart and out towards the extremities, preparing the arms and legs for action. These are natural reactions to physical threats, but are also present when the fear is not directly physical. While this physical response is helpful when we are facing a wild animal, the same is not true when our anxiety or fear is a result of our family or work relationships.

Today, bodily responses to fear can be detrimental, especially since the most important one is a negative one: the brain starts to shut down as the body prepares for action. The cerebral cortex, the brain's center for reasoning and judgment, is the area that becomes impaired when the amygdala senses fear. The ability to think and reason decreases as time goes on, so thinking about the next best move in a crisis can be a hard thing to do. Some people even experience feelings of time slowing down, tunnel vision, or feeling like what is happening is not real. These dissociative symptoms can make it hard to stay grounded and logical in a dangerous situation. Essentially, the body's response to fear or stress can be stressful in itself. (Call, 2008)

In the fear cycle, we are looking not only at the internal physical response to fear and anxiety, but also the physical action that may be taken in response to negative expectations. For many, this response is isolation, avoidance or defensive posturing. It is commonly known as fight or flight mentality. For our purposes we are looking at the effect this has in personal relationships. In stressful situations and highly anxious moments, this response is typically destructive and almost always has long-term negative effects on relationships. To reduce fear and discomfort, clients may avoid, dismiss or purposefully push others away. Those who suffer from high levels of fear may try to compensate by participating in high risk behaviors. But even in rather healthy clients,

acting out in small ways can prove destructive. For example, adoptive families often fear of the loss of control. In effort to regain some sense of control, one or both spouses may attempt to highly influence systems or people who function completely outside of their true realm of influence. In other words, they are acting to take control of the uncontrollable. It is a physical reaction to fear and one which continues to disappoint and negatively impacts important relationships.

The fear cycle does not depend upon a resolution, but sometimes there is resolution to a fear trigger. **Resolution** may come with the passing of time such as an event which has come and gone, or in the dissolution of a relationship, or in a number of different ways. Resolution can be an opportunity to reflect and challenge beliefs as will be discussed later.

When resolution is not part of the cycle, fear continues from physical responses and their consequences to the formulations of new **thoughts and beliefs**. Perhaps the cycle will cause old beliefs to become more entrenched and perhaps the cycle will provide opportunity for new thoughts and perceptions. As long as a client remains in the fear cycle, these new thoughts and beliefs will set them up for the next trigger rather than set them free from it. As they formulate beliefs, it is important to remember that these may have nothing to do with reality and clinicians can take this time to challenge erroneous thought patterns. Clients may also continue to suffer the consequences of their physical reaction to the fear trigger (such as relational isolation or defensive posturing) while they are formulating these thoughts and beliefs. This can have lasting effects on external relationships, their self-esteem or even their own sense of identity. The secondary consequences to this is often self-deception and the rejection of truth.

The illustrations below help to demonstrate both the primary fear cycle and the secondary consequences to functioning within the fear cycle.

Illustration I  
FEAR CYCLE (Primary Cycle)

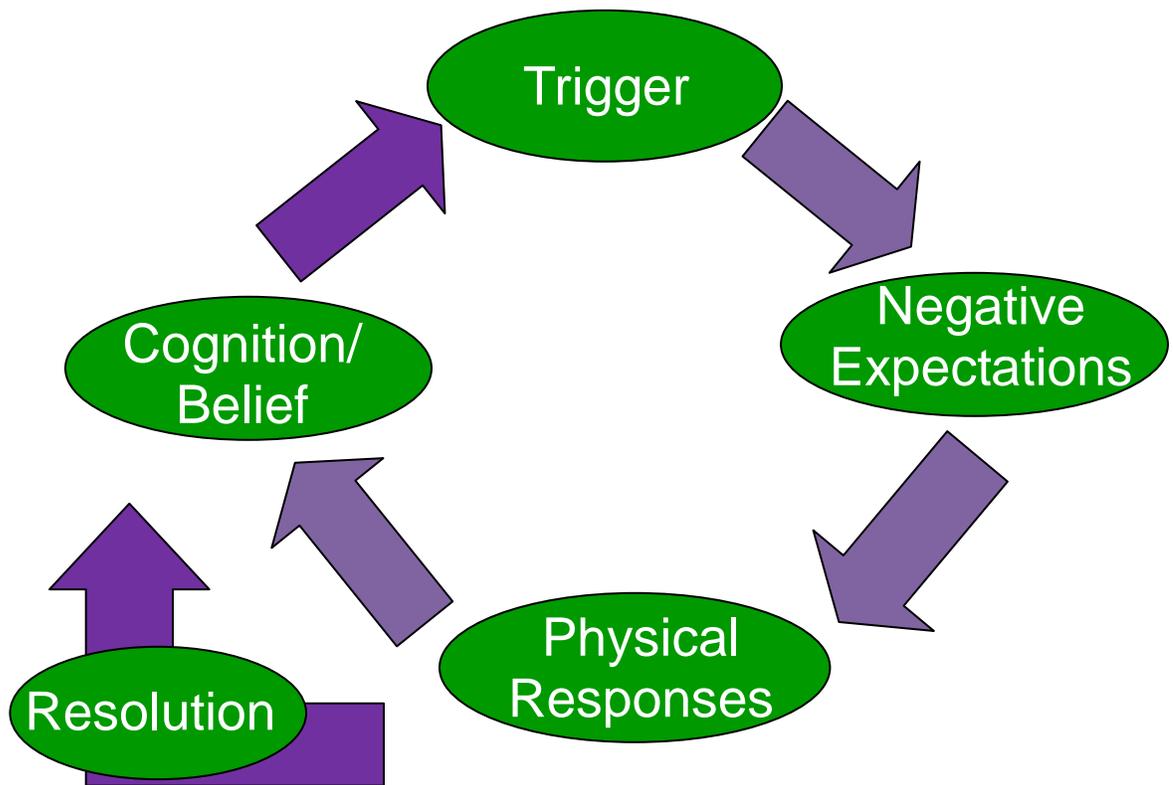
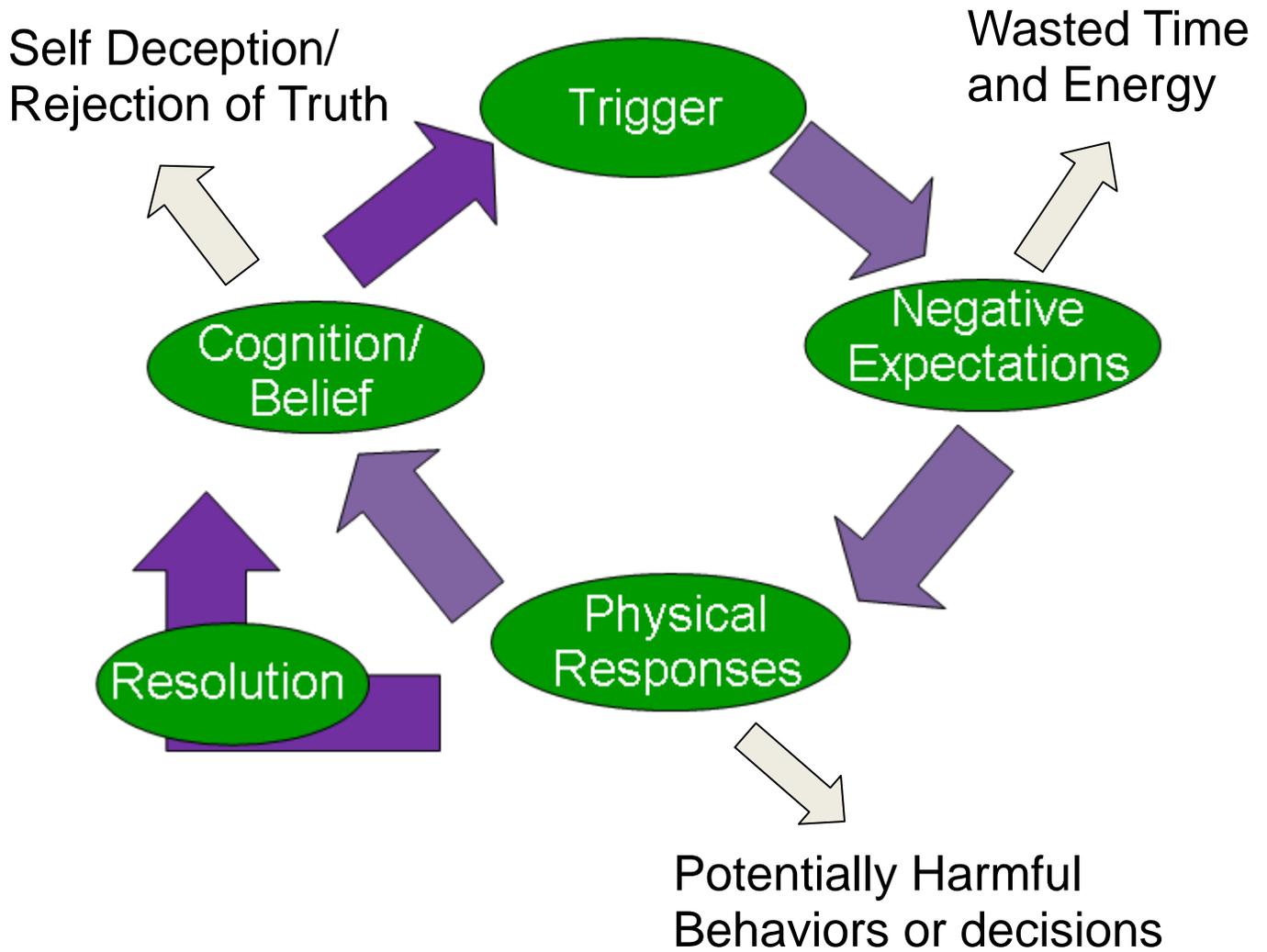


Illustration II  
FEAR CYCLE (Secondary Effects)



## **The Antithesis of Fear**

Thankfully, fear does not need to prevail. The fear cycle can be broken and replaced with behaviors that are both healthy and constructive in relationships. They are delineated rather plainly in scripture. In Psalm 56:3, David writes, “When I am afraid, I will trust in you.” The antithesis to fear is faith. And faith also appears to be understood in cyclical fashion. Depending upon scripture for clarity, we will use Philippians 4:6-7 as the key text and support each of the points with passages found throughout the scripture.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

The faith cycle, then, starts just as the fear cycle did, with a triggering event or perception. There’s always going to be a triggering event. There’s always going to be something that has the potential to produce fear in the hearts of mankind. The scripture clearly tells us in John 16:33, “In this world you will have trouble”. It is not a matter of if we will experience anxiety, but when. The presence of sin in the world and the deterioration of creation guarantees us that trouble and opportunities for fear and anxiety will continue to be abundant.

The command in scripture that Paul gives to the church in Philippi, however, is rather simple. “Do not be anxious about anything”. The audacity of Paul to suggest that anxiety could be dispelled in the middle of our trouble would be laughable if it weren’t so consistent with the rest of scripture and followed up with clear action steps. To be sure, God in the scripture repeats the command to “fear not” in hundreds of passages and contexts. There is a clear sense that not only does God expect that fear and anxiety are not in our best interest, but also that through Him, we can achieve this movement away

from fear rather successfully. Paul's follow-up to the command not to be anxious is where we find the movement of the faith cycle.

Clearly presented, *prayer with thanksgiving* is the desired response to fear and anxiety. Prayer is the connection of people to the heart of God. It encapsulates both meditation and relationship. It forces the body to pause, the heart to slow, and the muscles to relax. Prayer interrupts the potential for negative expectations and habitual thought patterns. Thankfulness, of course, is an attitude that results from the action of being thankful. The client who is thankful, is off to a healthy start, indeed. The secondary effects of thankfulness are both physical and relational. The presence of thankful people is attractive and enjoyable where anxious people tend to push others away. Thankfulness also has a clear link to health benefits in the body. This has been well documented by researchers in recent years:

In an experimental comparison, those who kept gratitude journals on a weekly basis exercised more regularly, reported fewer physical symptoms, felt better about their lives as a whole, and were more optimistic about the upcoming week compared to those who recorded hassles or neutral life events (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

As in the fear cycle, resolution may or may not come. Regardless, the consequences of being in a prayerful spirit and having an attitude of thanksgiving tend to be revelatory. Rather than being left within ourselves, we are intimately connected with our creator and can more adequately see His hand in the events that go on around us. Clients will find the presence of *peace* that was completely void from any aspect of the fear cycle. This is Paul's assertion in his command to the church in Philippi, David's reflection in the Psalms and the encouragement of John's gospel:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:27).

The faith cycle does not end with peace, but prepares the heart and mind of the believer for the next time our world produces trouble. According to the key passage Philippians 4:5-6, the peace of God will actually serve the function of guarding our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Contrary to the impulses of many good-intentioned people, guarding our hearts and minds is not accomplished through pulling away from an anxiety-producing situation. Rather, scripture states that guarding the heart and mind is accomplished through the peace that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Thus the faith cycle is completed and stands in stark contrast to the cycle that accompanies unchecked fear. The faith cycle gives direction and intentionality where the fear cycle is perpetuated by reactivity and habitual thinking.

Illustrations 3 and 4 as seen below help to demonstrate both the primary faith cycle and the secondary benefits from functioning within a faith cycle.

Illustration III  
FAITH CYCLE (Primary Cycle)

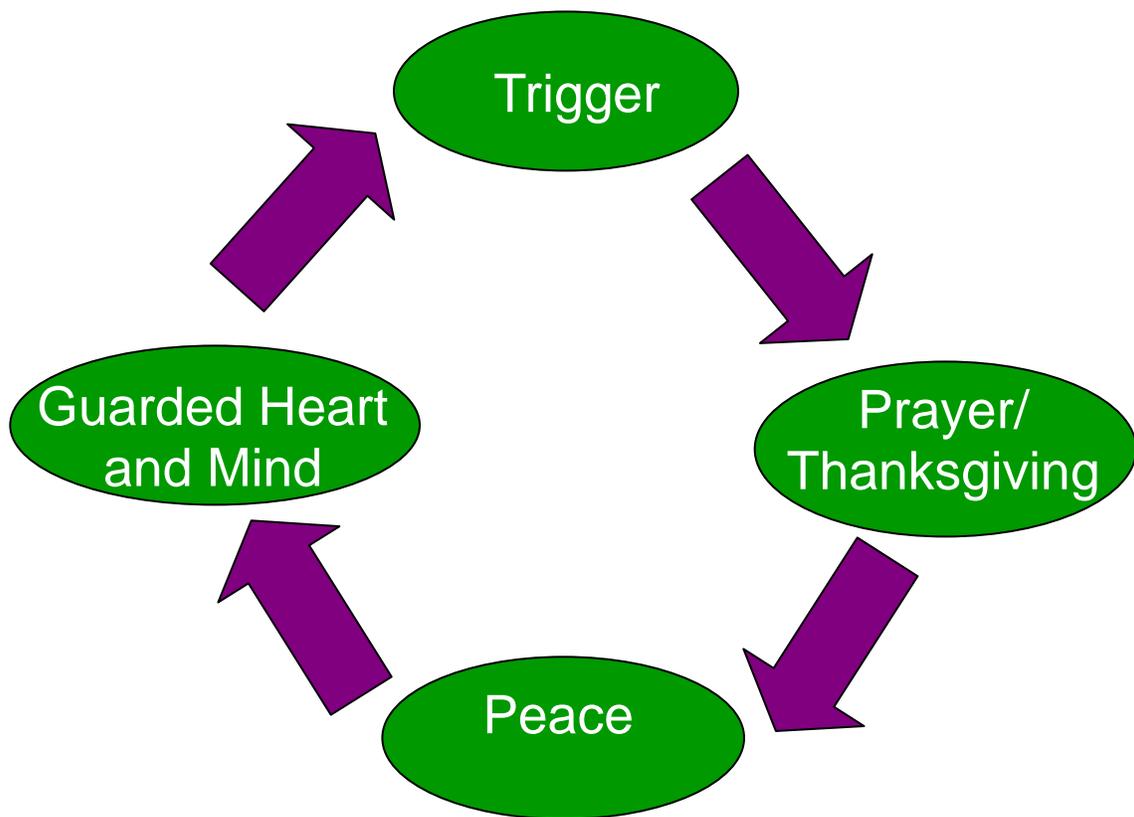
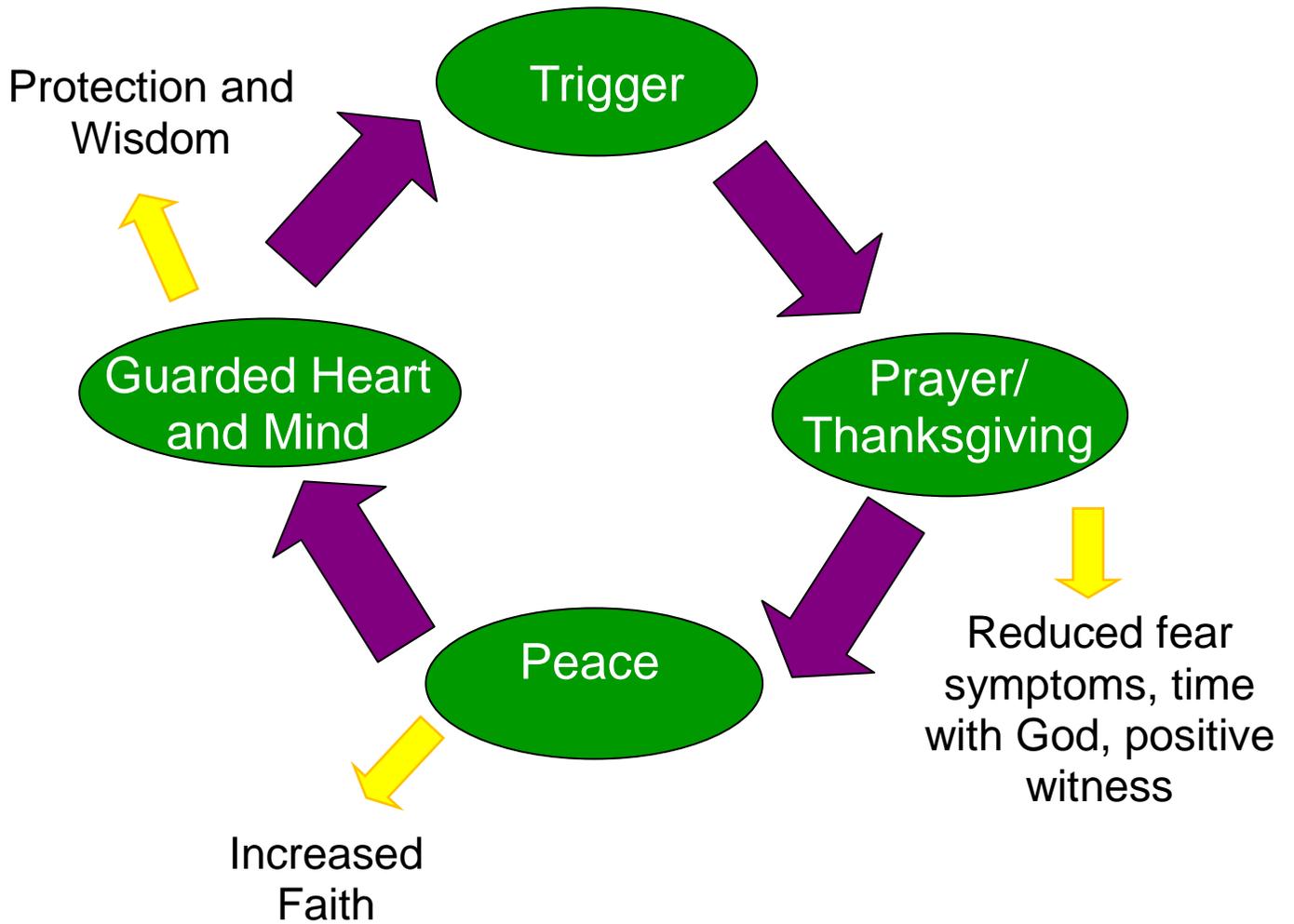


Illustration 4  
FAITH CYCLE (Secondary Effects)



## Working Between Cycles

The purpose of illustrating cycles and patterns is for the benefit of clients who would respond well to a visual demonstration of a Biblical truth. It is also meant to help clinicians, pastors and other helping professionals give a framework for these potential struggles. It is hoped that this work will help clients see behaviors and patterns that can be changed. Moving from the fear cycle into a cycle of faith appears to be very simplistic, but for the client struggling with fear, it will be a challenge and requires mindfulness, intentionality, and consistency; characteristics that our clients don't typically possess in moments of distress. Therefore, it is important to use homework tools to help clients actively move from one pattern of behavior to another. The following are suggestions to help, however, there are many other methods that are consistent with scripture and could help with this goal.

- Meditation on scripture that specifically addresses fear or trust in God's attributes. This may be especially helpful when countering negative expectations.
- Take every thought captive. Write down the significant thoughts that are bombarding you, and find truth to counter those faulty thoughts. This homework activity will help counter the incorrect suppositions and negative thinking.
- Surround yourself with scripture promises that apply in effort to hide God's word in your heart (see Appendix). Use cards, sticky notes, or be creative in how scripture is strategically placed in order to maximize the effect of being surrounded. The physical reminders of truth will become their own trigger to hiding God's word in our hearts.
- Write out your prayers. Our relationship with our creator is dynamic and becoming natural at communication through prayer is of supreme importance, but writing prayers down gives us a better chance to slow down and consider the thoughts that are being revealed. This can be very helpful for the counselor.
- Meditate on prayers of others that proclaim dependence on and trust in God.

- Begin a Thankfulness journal and lists of what God has done for you personally throughout your life. Spend time very specifically looking at the what God currently does every day to preserve your life and be intentional to identify blessings.
- Prayer request logs and answered prayers. Start keeping track of your prayer requests, both for yourself and for others. Review them regularly so that you can note the answers and resolutions to the prayers. Be sure to keep them close and review them. This serves to reinforce the faithfulness of God.
- Fasting (one meal, one day, electronics, Daniel Fast). Fasting is a particular discipline that demonstrates physically our devotion to God. It is good to bolster our prayers with action and fasting is one significant way to do that.
- Seeking godly counsel and wisdom through friends, family members, church members. Beyond the presence of a counselor, it is important of clients to have a significant network of supports that can also encourage them in their faith. The counselor can seek to help the client increase his or her supports.

These intentional activities and homework assignments can help contribute to the success of a client moving from a fear cycle to one of faith. The same potential for movement toward the fear cycle exists, however, even when our clients are actively pursuing a life of faith. There are behaviors that can derail the faith cycle and move us back to living in a state of fear. It is important to explore these behaviors with the client so that he or she can be active in identifying what is helpful or not helpful. This following short list of examples may help clients and helping professionals to begin to identify the activities that may hinder a client's faith.

- Negative words, advice, or experience received by the client that would serve to discourage them from trust
- Habitual patterns of thinking that are not held captive
- Misunderstanding or misreading scripture passages
- Prayer that does not appear to have been answered

- Failing to recognize the sovereignty of God and giving too much credit to luck and other non-Christian beliefs
- Depressive episodes or mental health issues

Recognizing and reviewing with clients the issues that can serve to derail or discourage them from pursuing a life of faith is very important. It takes work and activity to live in faith and to purposely trust in God. Clients need to be aware that the faith cycle is a practice that requires intentionality and support. Thankfully, another scripture gives us additional support and a significant promise. Philippians 1:6 shares this encouragement, "There has never been the slightest doubt in my mind that the God who started this great work in you would keep at it and bring it to a flourishing finish on the very day Christ Jesus appears." (Philippians 1:6 Msg.)

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The theory for the work of the fear cycle and faith cycle was developed by Dr. Robert Lehman, Professor of Counseling at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. His work and the observations and additional research of my practice with families and individuals over the past five years have resulted in this paper and presentation. The cycle is used with Dr. Lehman's permission.

## **Appendix**

### **1 Chronicles 28:20**

Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the LORD is finished.

### **Psalm 27:1**

The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?

### **Psalm 56:3-4**

When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?

### **Isaiah 41:10**

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

### **Isaiah 41:13**

For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

### **Isaiah 54:4**

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; Neither be disgraced, for you will not be put to shame; For you will forget the shame of your youth, And will not remember the reproach of your widowhood anymore.

### **Matthew 10:26**

Therefore do not fear them. For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known.

### **Romans 8:15**

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

### **2 Corinthians 4:7-11**

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

**2 Timothy 1:7**

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.

**Hebrews 13:5-6**

For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

**1 Peter 3:13-14**

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened."

**1 John 4:18**

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.

**Proverbs 3:5-6**

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.

**Jeremiah 29:11**

I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

**Romans 5:3-5**

We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

**Philippians 1:6**

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

**John 16:33**

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

**Philippians 4:6-7**

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.