

FEAR BUSTING & MONSTER TAMING: An Approach to the Fears of Young Children**

by Michael White*

In this paper, childhood fears are considered within the interactional context of the family. It is argued that the survival and growth of such fears is dependent upon the presence of a "fears life-support system". The details of this life-support system can be derived by an examination of the family members' inadvertent participation with a fears-lifestyle.

Interventions to disrupt this participation are discussed. These interventions include the introduction of a non-threatening interactional description of the problem and a structured ritual to challenge the fears' lifestyle. A case example is given.

CHILDHOOD FEARS

Many young children develop specific fears of different kinds, fears that relate to various issues in their development and the context of this development. These fears take many forms and their presence is often marked by anxiety, phobias and social withdrawal. Although children's fears can be extensive, they are mostly transitory, declining naturally over time (MacFarlane et al 1954, Agras et al 1972).

However, at times some of these fears are more tenacious and can persist through adolescence and into adulthood. When this is the case, fears can precipitate degrees of obsessive-compulsive behaviour that have a highly restricting and incapacitating effect on the lives of young people and the members of their family. In view of this, attempts should be made to resolve those fears in childhood that appear particularly tenacious and influential.

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Some of the most commonly experienced fears in childhood relate to the night. These can include a fear of darkness, of going to sleep and of monsters at loose and on the prowl. These fears are often accompanied by nightmares and fitful sleeping.

There have been various explanations in the literature for the occurrence and persistence of such fears, psychodynamic and behavioural theories most predominant among these. These different explanations bring with them different implications for intervention. One explanation that has been seriously overlooked in the literature relates to the prevalence of child abuse, including incest, in our community. Herman, upon amalgamating the results of five studies into sexual abuse, concludes:

... the results of the five surveys were remarkably consistent. One in three to one in five of all women reported that they had some sort of childhood sexual encounter with an adult male. Between four percent and twelve percent reported a sexual experience with a relative (cited in Breaking The Silence 1985). The connection between sexual exploitation and other forms of child abuse with the likely development of fears in relation to the night is an obvious one. Another explanation that has, until recently, been overlooked, relates to the profound insecurity that children may experience in relation to the threat of nuclear war and ecological catastrophe (Family Therapy Networker 1984, Sanders and O'Donnell 1985).

These explanations should always be entertained by therapists when assessing childhood fears and their context. If an exploration of the context of the fears supports or points to these explanations, appropriate action should be undertaken.

THE INTERACTIONAL CONTEXT

In many families it is clear that childhood

fears survive in an interactional context, one in which family members are inadvertently participating in the perpetuation and growth of the fears. An investigation of the attempts that family members make to assist the child to deal with their fears can provide the therapist with details of the fears life-support system and information about how the fears have become more influential.¹ This inadvertent application of problem maintaining solutions can be considered an example of the phenomenon of Deviation Amplifying Feedback (Wender 1968).²

In response to the child's experience of oppression by the fears, other family members, and particularly the parents, become more active in the child's life, taking steps to assume more responsibility for the child's security. They attempt to more strongly exercise their competence in the face of the fears in order to reduce the child's oppression. In response, the child invests more responsibility in the parents and experiences more incompetence. They become less able to supervise their own lives.

An interactional description of the problem, accompanied by a ritual, can be introduced to disrupt the family members' inadvertent participation with a fearful direction and to establish a more virtuous cycle in which family members participate with a more competent direction for the child. Variations of the ritual have been used with children from four years to eight years of age who experience tenacious night fears. A ritual for older children with fears has been developed by Epston (1983). When more extreme fears have developed in older children and adolescents, accompanied by severe forms of obsessive-compulsive behaviour, a more detailed approach may be necessary (see White 1985).

SETTING THE SCENE: ESTABLISHING RELATIVE INFLUENCE AND AN INTERACTIONAL DESCRIPTION

The therapist collects information regarding the fears' influence in the lives of all family members and evaluates, via the analysis of the solutions employed, the contribution that each is making to the fears' survival and growth. If it is established that one or both of the parents are experiencing profound concern/anxiety over other matters then this can be directly addressed to ensure that the application of a new solution to the child's problem will be unhindered. The other candidate explanations previously mentioned (incest and other forms of abuse, and anxiety regar-

ding the nuclear threat) are considered. The information gained from family members is carefully weighed by the therapist to determine the next step. If it is apparent that these other explanations are not the case and that the fears survive within a context in which family members are inadvertently participating with a fears' life-style, then the therapist can request a more elaborate description of the fears that the child is suffering from.

If the fears "look like" monsters, then the child is encouraged to draw pictures of them. If the fears are more non-specific, the child is encouraged to "put a face" to them; to picture in his/her mind what these fears could look like if they were to materialize. The therapist can assist with possible descriptions. The child is then encouraged to draw the images that they have established. If there is some reluctance to do so it can be explained that getting a picture of these fears down on paper is the first step towards capturing and taming them.

Following this, the therapist assists family members to establish the relative influence of the fears in their lives and of their influence in the life of the fears.³ It is often difficult for the child to give an account of their influence in the life of the fears. The therapist can assist them to open this account by drawing attention to areas of the child's life that could have been more eclipsed by the fears' influence. The therapist can then insist that the child and other family members help her/him to understand how, under the circumstances, the child has been able to retain as much control of their own territory as they have. Since the derivation of this description of the child's capacity to be influential in the life of the fears is so essential, and since it is at times difficult to establish, it can be derived indirectly. For example, I sometimes explain to the child that I plan to establish, via testing, the extent of their potential to be influential in the fears' life. Without disclosing the nature of the test I ask the child a series of random questions and then inform them of the results. I then require the child to explain how it is that they have been able to

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1. For discussion of the notion of problem maintaining solutions, see Watzlawick et al (1974).
 2. For further discussion of the notion of Deviation Amplifying Feedback and its implications for therapy see White (1984).
 3. For discussion of this concept of Relative Influence see White (1985).

answer 'x' questions at their own age level and 'y' questions at an older level.⁴ The recognition of their capacity to be influential in the life of the fears then becomes more accessible to them.

Other family members, and particularly the parents, are assisted to ascertain their relative influence when requested to detail the various ways that they have been invited to act as "fear-watchers" and "fear-supervisors". What sort of invitations have they received to be super-responsible for their child's security? Which invitations have they felt "compelled" by the fears to accept and which have they declined? The therapist can assist family members to locate those invitations that have been declined by speculating about the many other options the parents could have taken up to assume a super-responsible position in relation to the child. They can then be questioned about how, under the circumstances, they have managed to resist these invitations.

Time can then be collapsed for family members in relation to the fears' lifestyle by asking for speculation about what further invitations to fear-watch and fear-supervise could be activated should the fears' lifestyle become more extensive, and which of these invitations family members would be most vulnerable to accept. To what degree would family members become less influential should they accept these invitations?

The therapist then introduces a debate on the readiness of family members to challenge the "reign of terror". Is the child ready to make a comeback, to take a stand and reclaim some of their lost territory, to refuse to allow the fears to drive them to invite other family members to fear-watch and fear-supervise? Are other family members, and particularly the parents, ready to take affirmative action to decline invitations to extend their fear-watching and fear-supervising and thus undermine the fears' lifestyle? Are family members ready to try an experiment that will assist the child to "capture, tame, and supervise" their fears? Are they ready to weather the inevitable difficulties and distress they may experience on declining the fears' invitations? When the family's readiness is established, the ritual is introduced.

INTRODUCTION OF RITUAL

Most children readily agree that fears and monsters can be more fearsome at night than during the day and that it would be better for everyone concerned if they were contained at

night. I then usually ask children whether they know the "Fourth Rule of Monsters" and they usually reply that they do not. Upon discovering their ignorance of this rule I become incredulous and alarmed, stating that all children must know the Fourth Rule of Monsters.⁵ A variation of the Fourth Rule of Monsters, according to the age of the child, is then introduced:

Since monsters grow more fearsome with night-practice and more funny with day-practice, if children want to have a funny time then they should stop their monsters from having night-practice.

The child can then again be asked if it is true that they haven't heard of this rule before, and again most indicate that this rule is a complete surprise to them and wish that they had known about it before. However, some children suddenly realise that they did know this rule, but had forgotten it.

The idea of the family's readiness is revisited. Are family members ready to act on this rule? Their response is always affirmative and the therapist can proceed to introduce the following details regarding a ritual that will have to be practiced until the fears are properly tamed.

1. Upon returning home from the interview the parents are to procure a piece of rope and a wooden or steel box large enough for their child's drawings.
2. Prior to bed time, the child is to put his/her pictures of the fears in the box and, with parental assistance, secure the lid by tying up the box with one end of the rope.
3. Since the child's monsters are of the unruly variety, used to having their own way, they are likely to kick up a ruckus if they are prevented from having night-practice. Because of this, the child should be instructed to take the box into the garden and tie the other end of the rope to a tree or clothes line. This way the

4. For example: "You are six years old. Now, you answered 7 six year old questions, 5 seven year old questions, and 3 eight year old questions. How on earth did you do that and what does this mean about the future of your fears?"

5. Usually, at some stage, children and parents ask me what the other three rules of monsters are. I respond that either I haven't been told, have forgotten, or haven't found out about them yet and that they are probably rules that can only be discovered by children. I add that if family members discover the other rules I would appreciate being informed of them so that I can pass them on to other children.

monsters' fury will not disturb the household. Wherever possible, the rope should be tied such that the box is suspended. This is because fears are less troublesome if they cannot get their feet on the ground.

4. Before getting into bed the child is to locate his/her sneakers and either put them on or place them under their pillow. This is necessary because, if by chance the monsters do escape, it is the child's responsibility to interrupt their night-practice by chasing, catching and returning them to the box.
5. The fears are to be let out every morning for day-practice to make them funny.⁶
6. The parents are to obtain a photograph album and label it the "Monster and Worm Catching and Taming Album" or the "Fear Busting Album", and take pictures of their child (preferably with a polaroid camera) undertaking the various preparations for monster taming, including putting the monsters out at night. In addition, the parents are requested to take photographs pertaining to any other more fearless aspects of the child's lifestyle that emerge. They can request the child to pose for these photographs.
7. The album is to be brought to the second session for review. The photographs will be compared and the "winner" will be the one in which a monster catching and taming attitude is most evident.
8. Each evening the parents are to reflect upon, discuss and make notes on any attempts the fears have made to control them by provoking the child to send out fresh invitations for them to act as fear-watchers and fear-supervisors.

After introducing these instructions I usually show the child examples of the "Monster and Worm Catching and Taming Certificate" and the "Fear Busting Diploma". These awards are accompanied by automatic membership in either the "Monster and Worm Catchers and Tamers' Guild of Australia and New Zealand" (there is a branch in Auckland) or the "Fear Busting Association of the Southern Hemisphere". These awards also establish children as licenced Monster and Worm Catchers and Tamers or Fear Busters, ready and equipped to help other children who have fear problems. The child is consulted over which of the two awards they would prefer when they have beaten their fears.

Prior to closing the interview I usually inform families that children who have not had sufficient fears to become an experienced "tamer" or

"buster" are at a distinct disadvantage because they cannot be eligible to become a member of the Guild or the Association. The child is told that membership is so exclusive that, try as they might, it is unlikely that they will find any of their friends, relatives, or class mates who have either a Monster and Worm Catching and Taming Certificate or a Fear Busting Diploma.

A follow-up session is usually scheduled approximately two weeks from the first interview. At this meeting the therapist emphasises the child's success, reviews the album, and selects out those pictures that best convey the spirit of a more fearless lifestyle. I usually request copies of these pictures and ask for permission to show them to other children who might be experiencing similar fears as an example of what can be done. Most children are very happy about the idea of being a "good example" to others. The parents are asked to discuss any of the attempts that the fears have made to get a grip on them by inviting them to be super-responsible. The likelihood of relapses are discussed and contingency plans are established.

CASE EXAMPLE

Marjorie, a sole parent, was becoming increasingly concerned for her son, Mark, six years old. Mark had "always been a fearful child". He had a history of fitfull sleeping, often waking with "bad dreams", and was painfully shy.

Marjorie had, over the years, applied herself to this problem by taking every opportunity to reassure Mark and attempt to bolster his security. Upon seeking advice on this problem when Mark was four years old, she was told that his fears were the outcome of her separation from his father following the birth, and that they were also related to her ambivalence towards Mark. Marjorie despaired over this news and applied herself more strongly to the same attempted solutions, becoming more vulnerable to the acceptance of Mark's invitations for her to fear-watch and fear-supervise.

Mark's anxiety had recently reached an all-time high. He was anxious and withdrawn, ex-

6. One child broke this rule. The fears escaped one night so he decided to keep the monsters in the box all day just to teach them a lesson. Needless to say they did not attempt further escapes.

perceiving great difficulty at school and with peer relationships, and constantly worried about coping at night. Immediately upon his arrival home from school he would begin to demand reassurance from Marjorie regarding his approaching bed-time. After bed-time he would constantly venture out of his room, complaining of sleeplessness and his fear of monsters. He would only sleep when fatigued and usually woke several times with bad dreams. Marjorie was depressed and beginning to feel hopeless about the situation.

When Mark put "a face to the fears" he was experiencing, I remarked that they were indeed fearsome. I said that I was surprised that he managed any sleep at all with those monsters up to their tricks at night. Had he ever realised how surprising this was? Mark said that he hadn't realised this before. I then observed that his monsters were particularly naughty. Even when they knew he was fed up with them they would keep bothering him by waking him up at night. How was it that he was still able to stand up for himself against the naughty monsters' tricks and, in the end, get some sleep? Following further discussion of this, Mark discovered some other ways that he had been influential in the life of the fears.

I then discussed with Marjorie the various invitations she received from Mark to fear-watch and fear-supervise and we isolated a number of invitations that she had, in the past, successfully declined. I said that this achievement was particularly remarkable in view of the fact that the incorrect assessment made two years previously would have rendered her far more vulnerable to accept such invitations. Marjorie experienced instant relief upon her recognition of this fact. Following this I collapsed time on participation with a fears' lifestyle and ascertained Mark's and Marjorie's state of readiness to muster a challenge.

When the Fourth Rule of Monsters was introduced, Mark was initially surprised to hear of it. However, following my surprise at his surprise, he said he thought he may have heard of this rule before but had then forgotten it. He also thought he may have heard of the other three rules but had probably forgotten them as well. Both Marjorie and Mark wanted to act on the Fourth Rule of Monsters and the details of the ritual were introduced.

Both were enthusiastic about the ritual and Mark decided that he would try for the Fear Busting Diploma. Mark conveyed his confidence that, at the next meeting, he would be awarded this diploma.

At the next appointment, two weeks later, Mark was beaming and Marjorie looked happier and relaxed. Mark, carrying his "monster box" and Fear Busting Album, detailed how he had caught and tamed his fears. He now only allowed them day-practice and he thought they were indeed getting much funnier.

Marjorie said that Mark was doing much better at school, had started to invite friends home, was no longer anxious about going to sleep, and, for the first time ever, she was experiencing uneventful nights. The bad dreams had ceased. On two occasions she had spotted invitations for her to fear-watch and fear-supervise and had successfully declined these. We reviewed the Fear Busting Album together and Mark was presented with his diploma.

On the follow-up Mark was "fear-free" and relatively care-free. Marjorie reported that he had not had any relapses, was even more confident and that they were both much happier.

CONCLUSION

This paper considered childrens' fears within the interactional context of the family. The ritual described successfully interrupts inadvertent family-member participation with the fears' survival. In addition to the ritual, and in preparation for its introduction, I believe it is important that the therapist provide an interactional description of the problem that is non-threatening. This enables family members to apply different solutions, ones that are more informed by wisdom.

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