

Facing Fear: How to Find Courage and Embrace Hope

Interview with Sarah McCutcheon

Tania: Do you ever feel like fear is controlling your life, that it's holding you back from achieving your goals?

Sarah: It seems like at the moment fear is on our screens constantly. There's so much happening that is dark or that seems to be getting worse. It's amazing how often we just feel afraid, and we let it just sit there and we don't challenge it. And I think that's a real waste because you actually have to confront something and face it in order to deal with it. It's not about being fearless. It's about courage. It's about the ability to do something afraid.

Tania: Today I'm speaking with Sarah McCutcheon, who is the National Relationship Manager for Global Leadership Network Australia. Sarah has extensive experience talking about and helping people face their fears and learn to embrace courage, and I'm excited to hear her experiences and wisdom today.

Sarah, can you tell us a bit about yourself?

Sarah: Yeah, I'd love to. I've worked for the last 20 years with not-for-profit organisations, primarily working with young people. So, whether that's doing community development programs, or high school programs, or youth group, overseas service trips, anything with young people is really my passion. And my role primarily at the moment is to equip them and to give them opportunities to lead. And that's been something I've done, I feel like my whole adult life - I've worked in over 19 countries doing this and have been given the opportunity to work with locals in developing their own leadership programs for their young people. So it's really exciting to see a globalisation of youth culture and to see young people all around the world stepping into that space.

Tania: So, Sarah, you've worked in many different countries and have spoken to and taught future leaders about a range of things, but today I specifically want to ask you about facing fear. So perhaps let's start with a basic definition. How would you define fear and where do you see it in today's world?

Sarah: We are living in a world where there is a lot of threat. There's a lot to be afraid of. Fear in our lives, it can look like anxiety, insecurity, intimidation. It seems like at the moment fear is on our screens constantly. There's so much happening that is dark or that seems to be getting worse. And so, there's these feelings that happen to us, that's fear that really grips our hearts. And I think everybody at some stage in their life will need to face fear in their lifetime, it's not just a certain personality. But it's knowing how to recognise it and knowing how to define it.

Tania: So, what would you say are some of the more common fears that we have?

Sarah: Well, I like to separate fears into two different categories. There's what I call caution fears, and that can look like if you're walking to the edge of a cliff, you can feel scared of heights. And that's a reason - you're actually in danger. Or maybe you're walking around and you see a snake or a spider. There's a caution fear where there is a threat. And so those kind of fears make a bit more sense.

But then there's another category of fear that I've experienced a lot in my life. That's more, I call the 'relational fears' and that's fear of rejection, fear of failure, the fear of not being good enough. These kind of fears can swim around in our heads. And they're very common. I think we sometimes feel like we're the only ones who have those fears, but when I talk about them and bring them out in conversation, people are like, 'Oh me too!' And it's very validating sometimes. But they are more common than we realise and I think we tolerate them and think that 'oh this is just the way it is.' But it doesn't have to be that way.

Tania: Sarah, you're obviously quite a confident and courageous person now. Has it always been that way?

Sarah: My story actually involves a lot of fear. Growing up, I was quite shy, and I was quite a timid child. And I think because I allowed that to become sort of like my identity - it was how I was known, it was how people described me - I just accepted it. So, I didn't try and develop out of that or step out of that comfort zone or push myself to grow.

And so, I missed out on a lot of opportunities because of my shyness, even whether it's making new friends or if I was invited to someone's house, if I didn't know people, I didn't go.

I thought that that was just my normal. That's just who I am. I'm shy. This is my life now.

But I had to recognise that that's not the way it's supposed to be. And that's not how it has to be. I can realise that's a fear issue and I can actually overcome it. I can actually grow and challenge myself.

And do I still feel shy sometimes? Yes. But I've learned that it's not the dictator in my life anymore. So, if I feel shy, I'm like, 'okay, I feel a bit shy. I feel a bit timid. So, I'm going to keep practicing and keep practicing and keep stepping out of my comfort zone and keep approaching others and taking initiative.'

And it gets less and less controlling in my life.

It's amazing how often we feel afraid and we let it just sit there and we don't challenge it. And I think that's a real waste because you actually have to confront something and face it in order to deal with it.

But because, as I mentioned, with something like shyness, or even take insecurity, for example, people just feel like 'that's just who I am. I can't do anything about it.' But I guess I learned that I can *practice* confidence. And confidence, I think sometimes it feels like you're born with it, or you're not born with it. But confidence is actually a skill you develop, and you practice it by stepping out of your comfort zone.

So, I had this turning point where I recognised, 'Hey, I actually don't want to be shy anymore. I'm tired of being shy. I feel like this isn't what I want my life to be like.' And I think I was 17 when I started to make that decision. And a lot of that was because of my faith. I have a personal faith and that challenged me to realise, 'Hey, God didn't create me to be shy and to be afraid, but actually to move forward and to be someone who was being invited into a lot of opportunities.' It was only because I was shy that I couldn't do it.

Fear is a feeling, but it's also a decision we make. And so, I can't do anything about the feeling of fear that happens to me. I wasn't choosing to feel fear. But when I realised, 'Oh, I'm afraid right now. So, what am I going to do about it?' I made a choice, I found myself starting to overcome fear and develop confidence.

And sometimes you do have those bad days where you actually can't change the day. Like there's things happening in your life that I call "the uncontrollables" - you can't control them. But one of the most empowering things that I've learned in my faith journey and overcoming fear is that I can always control *how I respond*.

Viktor Frankl was an incredible man who survived the Holocaust. He said that 'everything can be taken from a man, except his ability to choose one's way.' And what he means by that is how we respond, how we decide we're going to deal with it, it's entirely within our control.

And that's when we start to grow character. That's when we start to change our perspective. And that's when we start to recognise that even the worst day can teach us something. And it can grow a resilience in us that becomes more empathetic to others that even develops that confidence. And actually, I think develops hope.

Tania: Sarah, you mentioned your faith and I can hear that this faith has had a big influence on your life. How do you define faith in today's world?

Sarah: It's to do with what we believe and it's how we view ourselves and the world around us, and what we tell ourselves – what we define truth as. But for me, I have a personal faith in Jesus. I define faith by what the Bible tells me. And there's this beautiful text in a scripture called Hebrews 11, verse 6, where the author explains that faith is not just believing that God exists, but believing that he rewards those who seek him. And so, I found that when I started to learn about faith, I started to realise that fear doesn't need to be the driving force in my life.

Tania: You've talked about times when fear has held you back, and you've had to step out in spite of this fear, but are there times when fear can be used for good?

Sarah: Yeah. I always say to people, when you're dealing with fear in your life and you're feeling afraid, the best thing you can do is ask yourself why. Just ask yourself 'why am I afraid?' Because if it's logical and it's a healthy fear, there's a reason.

And so it could be that caution fear we talked about where you are actually in danger. Like, let's say, for example, that you might be physically in threat, like the cliffs and the spiders and snakes, that's easy.

But what if you're afraid to trust someone? Like, what if there's a sense of fear that comes when you're in a relationship and you're feeling fearful and it's because you don't trust them? Well, I think you've got to explore that. You can't just be like, 'no, I'm not going to be afraid. I'm going to ignore this fear.'

I feel like fear doesn't just caution us on physical dangers. It can also caution us with the wisdom of, 'okay, the reason why I'm struggling to trust this person is because of their pattern of behaviour. The last time I trusted them showed that they couldn't be trusted.' And that's not a fear that you ignore. It's a fear that can have a little bit of, I guess a warning bell: 'Hey, be careful because last time you actually shared something with this person, it was told everywhere.' And so, you're afraid because of a past experience with that person.

So, I think that fear works as a caution in that space and it's healthy.

If you can't find a reason and it's not logical, that's when the issue of fear is, I'd say it's a 'sneaky fear' – these little fears that we tolerate, and they try and swim around in our heads until we call them out and be like, 'what am I actually afraid of here?' And we've got to identify that fear. Otherwise, we just keep living it.

Tania: So, when we are faced with fears, have you got some advice? How do we deal with those fears?

Sarah: The first thing that I say to people is name the fear. Fear has a name. So, name exactly what it is that you're afraid of. And a little tip here for you is it's going to sound really silly. And that's part of bringing fear into the light. It always sounds silly. Like 'I'm afraid of looking stupid,' 'I'm afraid of not being good enough,' 'I'm afraid of failure,' 'I'm afraid of people laughing at me.'

When we name that fear, that's part of bringing it into the light and it loses its power on you.

The second thing I say is once you've named it, ask yourself why. 'Why am I feeling like that? Is it because the last time I auditioned for this situation, it was a terrible moment and I'm worried about that happening again?'

Okay, so why don't you take account of that and develop the skills to be better prepared for next time.

Perhaps you're afraid because you don't have all the facts, you don't have all the information. Okay, go and get the facts.

Maybe you're afraid because there's trauma. So, I really recommend therapy or counselling to move past that trauma so you can actually develop the confidence that you survived that. How are you going to approach the next opportunity to grow when you are threatened by whatever you were afraid of last time?

So, name the fear, ask yourself why, and then the third thing is: make a decision. This is probably the most important part because you can identify a fear and know why and not do anything about it. But you actually want to be someone who

makes a decision. If you don't make a decision, fear will make the decision for you. And my life lesson is that fear is a terrible decision maker. So don't allow it to have that choice in your life.

You might still feel afraid after you've made a decision to overcome your fear, that's okay. There's the feeling of fear and then there's fear making the decision. You want to avoid fear making the decision. The feelings will eventually fade. And if anything, sometimes when I've made that decision and moved forward, I've found my courage.

So, it's something that I like to practice with people. Write it down in your notes on your phone or put it on a sticky note somewhere:

1. Name the fear
2. Ask yourself why
3. Make a decision, and start practicing confidence.

I find that sometimes when we've decided to overcome fear, we feel really brave in that moment and we think we're going to go for it. But sometimes we don't. We fail or we give in to fear or we let it take over. And there can be that guilt or even shame and embarrassment, or that sense of, 'Oh, well, I guess I can't do it.' But I want to just speak into that if that's you and say, give yourself permission to grow. This isn't all about: 'I've arrived now at a spot where I just never struggle with fear anymore.' I can't say that. And I think that it's just giving yourself permission that if you make a mistake, it's not final. If you give into fear, it's not final. It's not like, 'this is my life now, I'm someone who's fearful.' You're going to practice confidence and you're going to find yourself stumbling through it sometimes. And that's okay. Just remind yourself this is about growing. This is about developing confidence. This is about me stepping out of my comfort zone and it's going to take time. It's a practice.

Tania: And so where can hope be found in the midst of this?

Sarah: Well, I think hope can be found because hope looks forward and you're actually believing that practicing that means there's something on the other side of that fear.

Hope is deeply the belief that you anticipate that there's good up ahead, that things don't have to be the way they are now. Situations can improve. Winter turns to spring, seasons change, they're temporary.

And so, for me, my hope is also found a lot in my faith, in that I truly believe that God works all things out for good. Even in my difficult times and in my terrible days and in hardships, I've found that there's been lessons to learn and that I actually can move through them and become, I guess as I said before, more empathetic, more aware of the world around me and more considerate of others who are going through those situations.

Hope is beautiful and it's fierce, but we have to hold onto it. And we actually have to make sure that what we're focusing on has hope, not the problem, but what's up ahead. *That's* worth being hopeful over.

I used to think that hope hurt because I didn't want to be disappointed. What if I got my hopes up and it didn't happen? But I found that we don't hope in outcomes or in things we can't control.

For me personally, my hope is found in Jesus. And what I mean by that is, I truly believe that he is going to make something beautiful out of this situation. And so, I can trust that he's not just with me, that he's for me and he's moving me through this to better days ahead. And better might not look like the situation's improved, but I'm handling it differently. I'm not under it, I'm above it. And I actually feel like I'm able to use it to become someone who's wiser, someone who's got a strength and a resilience and somebody who I think can be more compassionate to the world around them.

So, I'm very passionate about hope as well because it's a big part of when you start overcoming fear, you develop hope in your life. It's a beautiful fruit.

Tania: What about someone who's hesitant about embracing hope, or thinking about faith, what would you say to them?

Sarah: I would like to ask: why are you scared? What are you avoiding? Like, what would be your fear in just being even open to the journey of faith?

Faith isn't academic, it's relationship. It can start with information; we might hear something about faith or hear something about God that we want to explore or that we're curious on. And I would just say, 'Hey, stay curious.' Like go a little bit deeper. If you have a friend who goes to a church, and you feel like you're open to it, go with them.

You don't have to feel stuck or forced. Faith cannot be forced, it's personal. It's a decision only you can make. But explore, ask questions, talk to people who have faith. But whatever you do, don't allow fear to stop you from going on a faith journey, because you might be surprised at what you'll discover.

Tania: So, what advice would you give to someone who feels that they just can't escape their life of fear?

Sarah: The Bible calls us to courage. And courage isn't about being fearless, courage is actually the ability to do something afraid.

You have to be afraid first in order to be courageous. So, courage is something you develop, and it starts small. So don't feel like you have to ignore the fear and pretend it's not there. Just call it out, and start deciding what you're going to do about it.

And you *can* escape a life of fear. Even if you can't escape the feeling, it doesn't have to be what rules your life.

For me, the ability to do something afraid, it comes from knowing that God's presence is with me, that I don't have to face it alone. Even as simple as, if something's intimidating me or some situation's threatening my life and I'm fearful, I can invite God into that space. And that might be a strange thought for people to

think about, but it means that I just bring that issue to God. And I believe that he hears my prayers. I have so many stories where that has been true. And I've had to remind myself, because sometimes fear is all-encompassing; it just takes over. But when I'm like, 'hang on a second, God, where are you in this situation? What have you got to say to me about the situation? And if you're with me, then I can do this.'

And I am evidence; if someone like me who was a very shy, and I'm talking *extremely* shy person, I couldn't even say my name in front of my class, I was terrified of public speaking - if I can live the life I am now, you can. You can overcome fear. It's not about being fearless. It's about courage. It's about the ability to do something afraid.

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