

When Fears Fall Away

Falls and injuries caused by falls can be scary. Fear is a natural, protective response that keeps us away from dangerous situations. While fear can be protective, it can also inhibit or stop us from being engaged in our lives in the ways that we truly want. The most common response to fear is avoidance, which can cause people to curtail and disengage from activities.

Confidence levels can decrease as MS progresses; and, when completing activities becomes challenging, people may give them up. Sometimes, individuals simply accept that falls are part of their lives and continue as they always have, often with a false confidence in their abilities. Others avoid accepting changes in their abilities and continue to push themselves in a risky way in order to defy these changes.

Risky Behaviors

In regards to fall hazards, we often do not realize that a fearful response, whether it is activity curtailment or defiance, actually *increases* the risks of falling. Avoidance due to fear usually just perpetuates and increases that fear, which then results in decreased confidence. Reduced activity levels lead to increased problems with balance, decreased strength, and decreased endurance. In addition, pushing ourselves into compromising situations, such as defying reality by not using a mobility device when it's needed, also poses great fall risk. These are types of risky behaviors that inhibit our ability to safely go forward with our lives.

Events and circumstances may cause us to modify or change our behaviors. The response is usually determined by the perceptions, beliefs, and emotions produced by a specific event. When the response is thoughtful, we are able to look beyond our perceptions and emotions, and behave in a way that is supportive of our well-being. However, when our response is reactive, we run the risk of making irrational decisions based on our emotions. These reactions may feel safe, but they can be inhibiting and stifling.

Model for Behavioral Response

Response Model	Reactive Response
<u>Event</u>	
This is something we perceive through one or more of our five senses; i.e. something we see, hear, taste, smell or feel.	<i>“I went to see a movie with friends and I tripped on the carpet and dropped popcorn on the floor. Someone had to clean it all up for me!”</i>
<u>Thought</u>	
There is a perception or belief about the event that leads to fear. We may be unaware of this emotion at that moment, as it is not always conscious.	<i>“It was really embarrassing when I tripped because everyone was looking at me. I really don’t want this to happen again because it just causes too much trouble for other people.”</i>
<u>Emotion</u>	
This is what we immediately feel in response to the event	<i>“The idea of going to the movies again makes me feel nervous. The carpet is easy to trip on, and I feel angry that I can’t make to my seat without walking very slowly.”</i>
<u>Behavior</u>	
This is how we act. It may be thoughtful or reactive .	<i>“I will not go to the movie theater anymore; it’s easier to not be a hassle to anyone.”</i>

Reactive vs. Thoughtful Response

A reactive response to fear limits our ability to see beyond the perceived circumstances. In the above example, the quick reaction is to avoid the theater. This might seem like the easiest response, but it will cause you to stop enjoying activities you love, decrease confidence in your abilities, and can lead to increasing isolation.

While fall risks are real, a thoughtful response can provide you with choices in how to manage them. Identifying these choices helps empower us to manage changes rather than deny they exist. Increasing self-awareness helps us know what choices we have in any given situation.

Achieving a Thoughtful Response

You can make a thoughtful response by taking the time to evaluate your situation and circumstances. We often don't realize we are being reactive until we take an introspective look. Increasing your awareness of how you respond and behave can help you identify ways to change your reactive response into a thoughtful one.

By further exploring the thoughts that lead to our emotions, we can take additional steps to analyze and change our process – and get past the fearful response. Ultimately, we are asking the questions: “What am I doing? How is that working for me? What might I change?” To find the answer **stop, look, and listen:**

STOP and acknowledge your fears.

- Are things the way you want them to be?
- Are you managing your life in a way that prevents falls but does not stop you from enjoying your life
- How have things changed over the last year to five years with respect to doing the activities you enjoy?
- Are you doing anything differently (more or less) than before?
- Have you stopped doing activities you once did?
- Are there activities you want to do more often, better, or differently?

LOOK at what and how you are doing daily activities.

- Are things happening the way you want them to? Why or why not?
- What fears are you experiencing, how are you responding, and why you are responding the way you are?
- What about the activity may cause you fear, stress, or anxiety?

LISTEN to yourself.

- Are you content with your response?
- What other choice(s) could you make to address this fear?
- How you could do things differently?
- Do the new choices lead to a “win” for me?