



Nerve: Adventures in the Science of Fear

Eva Holland

The Experiment (Apr 14, 2020)

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To what can we attribute a phobia? Is it a bad memory metastasized, or is extreme fear unrelated, or not always related, to memory? Furthermore, what exactly happens when we feel fear? Does the feeling of fear prompt the body to tighten muscles, shiver, sweat, et cetera, or is it the other way around: does our mind conjure up the feeling of fear in response to our body's physical reaction?

Such are the questions threaded through Eva Holland's *Nerve: Adventures in the Science of Fear*, her courageous chronicle of many fraught years spent facing down two debilitating phobias—of losing her mother and of heights. Fear, Holland learned, is not what she thought. By taking part in innovative pharmacological and exposure therapies, interviewing some of fear science's leading scientists, and simply jumping out of a damn plane, she found that fear lost much of its fearsomeness.

In Amsterdam, Holland sought help from Merel Kindt, a therapist using the beta-blocking drug propranolol to eliminate the emotional effects of a fearful memory. "The procedure is not about erasing memories," Holland writes. "Instead, it's as though it unmoors them so they can no longer trigger our fear responses in the present." After being elevated over sixty feet in the rickety bucket of a firemen's lift, a traumatized Holland took a single pill of propranolol and "Sooner than I expected, I felt completely calm. My body felt normal again."

Poignant and humorous, Holland's demon-chasing journey is an inspiration.

MATT SUTHERLAND (May / June 2020)

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