

Feared Fantasy

What is the Feared Fantasy?

The Feared Fantasy Technique, developed by Dr. David Burns, helps people confront their fears about what others might think of them.

Many of us worry about others' opinions, which can make it difficult to relax, speak up, or simply be ourselves. This exercise helps you discover one of two things:

1. The feared situation isn't as scary as you imagined.
 2. Even if it is scary, you can learn to tolerate those feelings and feel freer around others.
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Case Example: *“They’ll think I’m terrible and won’t want to play with me”*

Jerry recently moved to a new town for work. To meet new people, he signs up for a beginner pickleball meetup but as the day approaches, he starts to feel anxious. His thought: “They’ll think I’m terrible and won’t want to play with me.”

Therapist: I’d like to show you a technique called Feared Fantasy. It can help you feel more comfortable at your meetup by facing the thought, “They’ll think I’m terrible and won’t want to play with me.” Would you be open to trying it?

Jerry: Sure.

Therapist: Great! This is a role-play exercise that takes place in a kind of nightmare world; like something out of Alice in Wonderland. In this world, people say out loud exactly what you’re afraid they’re thinking.

I’ll play the “nightmare” version of the people at the pickleball meetup, and you’ll play yourself. Just to be clear, I don’t actually believe these things. I’m only acting them out. Does that make sense?

Jerry: Yes, it does.

Roleplay

- **Therapist (as nightmare pickleball player):** “Hey Jerry, I saw you miss that ball. You’re so terrible at pickleball! You’d probably win the award for *worst player ever*. We never miss like that. We would never want to play with someone who misses balls!”
- **Jerry:** Hey, look at that we both win an award! Me for worst player ever, and you for meanest pickleball player ever. It’s my first time playing, and everyone misses sometimes. The point is to practice and get better, not to be perfect right away.

Therapist: How was that for you?

Jerry: Not too bad. Honestly, I don’t think people would be that mean especially at a beginner meetup. They probably expect mistakes and just want everyone to have fun.

How You Can Use This Technique

Step 1. Identify your feared thought. What are you afraid others are thinking about you? Write it down.

Step 2. Create your “nightmare world.” Imagine that the person really does think and say those things. Now blow it out of proportion. Make it ridiculous! (e.g. “Even a one-year-old could beat you!” “You set a world record for being the worst!”)

Step 3. Exaggerate their confidence. Add details about how amazing they think they are. (e.g. “I’m so great that even pros come to learn from me!”)

Step 4. Respond to them. What would you say if they actually said these things out loud?

Step 5. Reflect. How would you feel about someone who talks like that? Would a kind person actually say such things? Would you want to be close to them?

Step 6: Repeat as needed. If you still feel anxious, replay the “nightmare” a few more times—five, ten, or even a hundred times. Like rewatching a scary movie, the fear fades with repetition.

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- *The more **absurd** you make the “nightmare” version, the easier it gets. This is similar to Paradoxical Magnification(a humorous technique) exaggerating helps reveal the truth behind your fear.*
- *This technique doesn’t work for everyone. If it doesn’t feel right, other approaches may help more.*
- *Feeling anxious is normal. The goal isn’t to get rid of anxiety right away but to face it and reduce its power over time.*
- *Try this technique again with other fears about what people might think of you.*

Final Note

The Feared Fantasy technique can be surprisingly freeing. By facing your imagined fears head-on rather than trying to avoid or suppress them you begin to see how exaggerated and even humorous they can be. Over time, what once felt intimidating may start to feel lighter or even empowering. Remember, courage isn’t the absence of fear; it’s the willingness to face it and discover that you can handle whatever comes your way.