

The Thing We Fear More Than Death

Why predators are responsible for our fear of public speaking

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Surveys about our fears commonly show [fear](#) of [public speaking](#) at the top of the list. Our fear of standing up in front of a group and talking is so great that we fear it more than death, in surveys at least. On one hand I understand, having sweated myself about getting up in front of a group. On the other hand, it seems odd that we're so afraid — what are we afraid of, anyway? What do we think will happen to us? We're unlikely to suffer any real or lasting harm — or are we? The answer seems to lie in our remote past, in our evolution as social animals.

Humans evolved over the last few million years in a world filled with risks like large predators and starvation. Based on the fossil evidence of predator attacks on our human ancestors (as described in the book *Man the Hunted* written by Robert Sussman and Donna Hart), and on predation rates on large primates today, early humans were probably commonly hunted by a wealth of large predators. One common defense to predation displayed by primates and other animals is to live in groups. In a group, other group members can alert each other to predators and help to fight them off. The advantages of living in a group probably are the reason why early humans and other large primates evolved to be social, and why we are still social today.

Humans were not the largest, fastest, or fiercest animal — early humans survived by their wits and their ability to collaborate. Those that worked together well, helping others in their group, probably survived and passed on traits that contributed to social behavior. Failure to be a part of the social group, getting kicked out, probably spelled doom for early

humans. Anything that threatens our status in our social group, like the threat of ostracism, feels like a very great risk to us.

“Ostracism appears to occur in all social animals that have been observed in nature,” said Kip Williams, a professor of psychological sciences at Purdue who has studied ostracism. “To my knowledge, in the animal kingdom, ostracism is not only a form of social death, it also results in death. The animal is unable to protect itself against predators, cannot garner enough food, etc., and usually dies within a short period of time,” said Williams.

The fear is not just about public speaking, but is also faced by many others who are faced with getting in front of a crowd and performing like athletes, actors, and musicians. As a social psychologist, teacher, and a sufferer of [social anxiety](#), Dr. Signe Dayhoff suffered through intense fear of public speaking every time he got up to teach a class. “My tongue stuck to the roof of my dry mouth and I couldn’t swallow, I blushed, sweated and trembled,” he said. Eventually it got so bad that it interfered in his ability to do his [job](#). Getting help, he found he could deal with the situation better. “As I recovered 12 years ago, using [cognitive-behavior therapy](#), patience, persistence, and practice, I found that nearly 20 million individuals at any one time suffer from some form of [social anxiety](#). They fear being negatively evaluated in anything they do; fear being rejected; fear being abandoned.”

When faced with standing up in front of a group, we break into a sweat because we are afraid of rejection. And at a primal level, the fear is so great because we are not merely afraid of being embarrassed, or judged. We are afraid of being rejected from the social group, ostracized and left to defend ourselves all on our own. We fear ostracism still so much today it seems, fearing it more than death, because not so long ago getting kicked out of the group probably really was a death sentence.

Glenn Croston is the author of “[The Real Story of Risk](#)”, exploring the

twisted ways we see or fail to see the many risks we face in the world around us. He is also the author of "[Gifts from the Train Station](#)", telling the inspirational stories of people who've faced great challenges and overcome them to reach out and help others.